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ABSTRACT

Based on a survey of superintendents from 100 of the nation's largest urban and ex-urban districts and on interviews with 40 large-district superintendents, this study finds that a majority of urban school superintendents believe that their ability to implement reform in order to raise academic achievement is frustrated by district governance. The study highlights problems facing urban school superintendents, including challenges to authority from school boards, teacher unions, and central office staff; political pressure from competing power centers; and inadequate job preparation and unrealistic expectations. In order to allow superintendents to make significant improvement in student performance, the study recommends the following changes: the duties and responsibilities of school boards must be reshaped; superintendents must have the authority to hire, fire, and reassign central office staff and school principals; superintendents must have more authority over district funds and enjoy greater autonomy managing federal, state, and categorical (single-program) funding; pre- and in-service training should be overhauled to focus on leadership and public management skills in addition to education theory; and recruitment efforts should focus on finding candidates with high-level political, managerial, and leadership skills. The appendices present the research methodology and survey instrument. (SM)

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Center on Reinventing Public Education

An Impossible Job?

The View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair

Howard L. Fuller

Christine Campbell
Mary Beth Celio
James Harvey
John Immerwahr
Abigail Winger

Funded by The Wallace Foundation

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July 2003

An Impossible Job?

The View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair

A Report Prepared under a Grant from
The Wallace Foundation

to the
Center on Reinventing Public Education
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington

Howard L. Fuller
with
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Mary Beth Celio
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John Immerwahr
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"The superintendency as now structured is undoable."
—Latino male, veteran urban superintendent

"The battles are winnable, but the job is currently unmanageable."
—African-American male, veteran urban superintendent

"In urban districts ... it doesn't seem that a superintendent has much of a chance to succeed."
—White male, veteran urban superintendent

"Maybe it's undoable because of the politics.... We know what to do. It's the politics that block us."
—African-American female, veteran urban superintendent

Executive Summary

Based on a survey of superintendents from 100 of the nation's largest urban and ex-urban districts and on interviews with 40 large-district superintendents, this study concludes that the consensus of urban school superintendents is that many of the conditions of the superintendency set them up for failure. In particular, superintendents believe that:

- The structure of the position virtually precludes them from doing what they were hired to do. (Chapter 1)
- Although the policy discussion about schools revolves around student achievement, local school dynamics are driven by employment demands. (Chapter 2)
- They do not control their own agendas but are whipsawed by the demands of competing power centers within the system. (Chapter 3)
- Crisis can empower them. Although changing and fickle demands from the public are hard to follow, external pressure and even crises can strengthen leaders' hands, enabling changes that would otherwise be impossible. (Chapter 4)
- Although some districts are making progress in improving the performance of minority students, the skill in shortest supply is the ability to close the achievement gap. (Chapter 5)
- While nontraditional superintendents try to think outside the box, they are struggling with the same issues as their traditional peers and their success is by no means assured. (Chapter 6)
- Training can be improved, but experience counts for a lot. The superintendency is a public management position in which political skill and calculation are as important as expertise about instruction. (Chapter 7)
- They need to be freed from constraints. Superintendents want the authority they need to become true educational CEOs. (Chapter 8)

- Barriers to school reform are too numerous to overcome just with new and better leadership. Preparation must be improved and district governance should be reshaped. (Chapter 9)

Overall, the study concludes that veterans of the urban school wars in the largest school districts believe the job is undoable. Expectations for superintendents' performance are so high they are unlikely to be met with current resources and existing authority. Incumbents in most of the nation's other large urban and suburban districts share that view, but pull their punches and choose their words more carefully.

This study argues that superintendents need enough authority to lead and change their districts. Given the expectations imposed on them, they deserve authority commensurate with their responsibilities. The final chapter outlines a constellation of changes required to empower superintendents, ranging from more authority over central office staff and hiring to more stable and effective school boards.

In the end, the issue is not simply finding better leaders or even improving existing structures. Both are essential of course. The real issue is how to build and sustain strategies for eliminating the achievement gap in big cities. Good superintendents will be those who are committed to doing that, regardless of background or training. Effective superintendents will be those enabled to do what needs to be done to achieve that goal.

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Preface

The Center on Reinventing Public Education of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington undertook a study of the urban superintendency in 2000 with support from The Wallace Foundation. The study is part of a major, multi-year, multi-million dollar effort by The Wallace Foundation to help improve and develop new leadership for American schools.

The goal of the Center's larger three-year investigation was to stimulate and inform a national movement toward remedying four problems related to the supply of principals and superintendents in the United States: leadership shortages, inadequate training, poor understanding of leaders' roles, and a general lack of ownership of the supply problem. The study set out to understand whether an educational leadership shortage exists; to examine current leadership roles and those likely in the future; and to suggest policies that align training and recruitment with the actual and future roles of leaders.

The research reported here is one of five efforts supported at the Center as part of The Wallace Foundation effort. *An Impossible Job?* restricts itself exclusively to an examination of large-district school superintendents. Other reports from the Center will be devoted to the job of the school principal, principal shortages, human resource development, and indicators of community support for schools.

An Impossible Job? continues and expands upon a line of inquiry initiated in an earlier study funded by The Wallace Foundation. That study, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*, completed by the Public Agenda Foundation in 2001, was based on a survey of superintendents and principals from around the country.[1] Public Agenda's study focused on school leadership nationwide. The research reported here focuses on superintendents in the nation's largest districts. It also examines a number of issues that were not covered in the earlier study but are of major concern in large districts. These include: the achievement gap between white and minority children; the often-troubled relationship between superintendents, boards, and unions; and the recent interest in hiring superintendents from nontraditional backgrounds.

[1] Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, and Tony Foleno, with Patrick Foley, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership* (New York: Public Agenda, 2001).

Study Questions

With regard to the urban school superintendency, the Center wanted to understand the position well enough to assess whether it could be done and under what circumstances. Toward that end the study investigated five questions:

- What are the common challenges in the urban superintendency?
- How differently do superintendents from different backgrounds—including those who came up through the ranks in the public school system and individuals recruited after careers in business, the military, the law, or the public sector—approach the job?
- Among the challenges and barriers encountered by superintendents, which ones are they least able to overcome? Are superintendents' failures to overcome these challenges due to lack of personal skill, inadequate training, the inherent weakness of the office, or some combination of the three?
- How well are superintendents prepared to meet the challenges of the job—both those that now exist and those they will encounter in the future?
- What, in superintendents' own opinions, would it take to create more effective schools in big cities; and what skills and powers would superintendents need to lead the necessary reforms?

Ultimately, the Center hoped to make suggestions of two kinds: First, how to re-define the responsibilities and powers of the superintendency so that competent people can expect to succeed in it. Success in this case would be defined not as survival but as leading sustained and effective strategies to improve student achievement, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Second, the Center wanted to explore how to recruit and prepare individuals as well as possible for the unique mix of political, educational, and moral leadership that the urban superintendency requires.

The study team sought to understand the experience of big-city superintendents in great depth and to obtain a nationally representative picture of superintendents' experience, needs, and assets. The team plumbed superintendents' experience via individual and focus group interviews and through a national survey. The focus groups and interviews involved some 40 current and former superintendents (including two parochial school su-

perintendents). The survey was sent to superintendents from the 100 largest public school districts in the nation; seventy responded. Additional information on the study's methods and procedures can be found in Appendix B.

It needs to be stressed that the findings and recommendations contained in this report rest entirely on the views, opinions, and responses of superintendents. It makes no effort to present multiple perspectives on the issues raised here or to offer comments from other interested parties, including unions, board members, central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, or community leaders. In the authors' view, this is not a weakness. Policymakers are demanding that leaders step up to the plate to improve school performance and close the achievement gap. To our knowledge, this document is the first attempt to discern how the most significant district leaders understand the challenge they face and define the problems they encounter.

Introduction

School superintendents are many things. They are chief executives of large organizations; occupants of a public office that symbolizes community commitment to children's education; agenda-setters for the improvement of schools that can never be good enough; and high-level managers charged with implementing policies and contractual obligations established by legislatures, state and national agencies, community boards, and the judiciary. Their obligations are wide-ranging and complex.

In another age, it might have been easier to balance these roles. A generation ago, for example, the urban superintendent who managed a large budget effectively and kept a major public enterprise functioning was likely to be considered a success. Superintendents might also have been asked to make sure that all children had access to a solid education, but few would have held them accountable for what students learned.

In 21st century America, however, especially in big cities, the stakes have been raised dramatically. Competent management is taken for granted. But providing access to an education of high quality is no longer sufficient. Today's education discussion revolves around a commitment to all children learning to high standards. The bar for school performance has been set very high; schools in urban area struggle to meet the needs of their students. In the words of new federal legislation, "No Child [is to be] Left Behind." The addition of these new expectations to inherited roles makes the superintendency in major urban areas an extremely difficult job.

Superintendents can be blamed for the persistent problem of low-performing schools, especially in poor and minority neighborhoods. They are alternately lionized and condemned, depending on whether the community's mood about its schools is positive or negative. They are expected to suggest bold reform initiatives, but can become politically isolated if their initiatives offend important groups. They often find it impossible both to make needed changes in the schools and to abide by all applicable rules and contractual constraints.

Some superintendents find ways to balance these roles, and keep their jobs for five years or more. But others flame out very quickly—in some cases within a year of being hired. Although conventional wisdom holds that urban superintendents turn over every 2.5 years, the research reported here indicates that number exaggerates the problem. Nevertheless, many superintendents are itinerants, outsiders in communities

with rich and idiosyncratic political traditions and rhythms. Except in very special circumstances—superintendents who are protected by mayors or others whose hold on power is very secure—most superintendents choose between relatively short tenures marked by bold action and longer tenures sustained by caution and accommodation.

Some superintendents leave their jobs considered successes—at least in terms of maintaining community support and having held on to their positions—but many do not. Like coaches of professional and college sports, most understand their tenures are likely to end badly.

Regardless of how they leave, no superintendent has left an urban community successfully, if success is understood to be raising student achievement for low-income and minority students and closing the achievement gap. It is true that some have succeeded in raising student achievement at the elementary level for low-income and minority students, but none has sustained this improvement over time. Equally significant, there is little evidence of the ability of school leaders to extend short-term achievement gains in the elementary grades to the middle and secondary school years. Success has been limited to the elementary years, and even there it has yet to be brought to scale.

Several communities, discouraged about the fate of prior efforts to improve achievement, have turned to people outside the education establishment in their search for educational leadership. They reason that traditional superintendents, having worked their way up—from teacher ... to principal ... to central office official ... to superintendent—are children of the "system" and beholden to it. As products of the system, they are likely to be reluctant to subject it to pressure and unfamiliar with broader community politics. It is too early to tell whether such outsiders will have a higher success rate than traditional superintendents. But as is evident in the research reported here, nontraditional superintendents also find the burdens of the job heavy and its powers light.

The superintendency is problematic but essential. Though there are many proposals for changing the ways big cities create and support schools, almost all of them assume the existence of some public agency whose mission it is to make sure that every child has access to an effective educational program, and a chief executive to lead it.

As a group, the superintendents responding to this study's survey oversee more than 9,000 schools, more than 300,000 teachers, and about 6.5 million students. These superintendents, in short, preside over school districts educating about one-seventh of all the students enrolled in public schools in the United States.

What we hear in the voices of these superintendents is their frustration that their commitment to teaching and learning is over-

whelmed by the political demands of their jobs. In some ways they seem to be set up to fail, forced to deal with unrealistic expectations without the tools and authority they need to make a difference.

Much of what is reported here has been said before, perhaps not so pointedly. But because there is unusual interest today in the role of leadership in improving school performance—and because these superintendents speak with such conviction about these issues—perhaps this time their voices will be heard.

Paul T. Hill
Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education
Acting Dean, Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
July 2003

Chapter 1 An Impossible Job?

The structure of the position virtually precludes superintendents from doing what they were hired to do.

An African-American school leader, a veteran of several superintendencies in different parts of the country, was reflecting on the high- and low-water marks of his long career in public education. Almost in passing, he ruminated: "My daughter recently finished everything but her dissertation for her doctorate in education. She wanted to be a school administrator. She recently dropped out," he reported, "and enrolled in law school.... After watching the battles I'd fought, she decided she didn't want to waste her career."

Nobody would expect for a minute that an urban school leader's job would be easy, a stately progression from one high-minded decision to another, each greeted with the accolades of an appreciative public. But the message that came through clearly in the research reported here is that the job is well-nigh impossible. Another superintendent from the Midwest described a similar situation. This time it involved a graduate student serving as an intern, shadowing her every move, day-to-day. "As she watched what I had to go through, she would sit in the corner of my office and shake her head, slowly, from side to side and say, 'Uh-uh. Uh-uh. How do you put up with that?' She dropped out of the graduate program. She told me it wasn't worth it."

School superintendents direct highly complex bureaucracies and deal with teachers, unions, students, parents, community organizations, the business community, governing boards, and politicians. Although to the outsider they appear to be in charge, insiders understand that they are pressured by many different interests and rarely control their own agendas.

Superintendents perform intensely public but essentially lonely jobs. It is not surprising, therefore, that at conferences and meetings with other superintendents, they spend endless hours trading war stories such as those above, relishing the opportunity to talk to colleagues who understand what their lives are really like. Yet while they often describe their jobs as rewarding, albeit demanding and difficult, many of the superintendents we interviewed from urban districts also described their work as "undoable." They suggested that the job is more than challenging; it is in fact impossible. The following comments communicated their frustration:

"The battles are winnable but the job is currently unmanageable."

"The superintendency as now structured is undoable. My experience is that it needs to be restructured to focus on the central work of teaching and learning."

"Particularly in urban districts ... it doesn't seem that a superintendent has much of a chance to succeed."

Occasionally, such views were offered by people who were bitter, angry, or disillusioned. But most respondents were none of these things. The superintendents and former superintendents interviewed were typically upbeat and positive, offering comments that seemed to analyze dispassionately a serious mismatch between what they are asked to do and the conditions in which they have to accomplish their goals. Many insisted that if *this* problem were solved, or *that* issue taken off the table, they could get the job done.

The superintendents referred not just to challenges posed by inadequate financial resources or the socio-economic circumstances of the students they seek to serve. In fact, several of those interviewed went out of their way to insist that finances and challenges of race and class are not the underlying problem. Rather, they pointed to complex relationships and lack of authority that virtually preclude them from doing what they have been hired to do.

What factors can make a leader's job doable? There are many, some very basic. First, the goals that leaders are expected to pursue should be clear. Next, leaders should have the authority to move the organization toward those goals. Third, leaders must have the firm support of the governing body to which they report. Fourth, leaders should be given a reasonable amount of time to achieve their goals. Finally, leaders should be offered incentives for success. While these criteria might seem overly simplistic even for students of Management 101, as interviewees told the story, many urban superintendents cannot take them for granted. They either have to fight to obtain them or try to do the job without some of them.

In many ways, according to the comments of these superintendents, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that failure is built into the position of the large-city superintendency.

Chapter 2 Follow the Money

Although the policy discussion about schools revolves around student achievement, local school dynamics are driven by employment demands.

In any community, no matter how large or small, schools are impressive for their economic clout. In practically every urban district, the school system is one of the city's biggest economic assets, both a significant spender on local goods and services and a major employer. In some major cities, schools will be conceivably the biggest employer, controlling employment opportunities by the thousands and even tens of thousands of positions.

These employment opportunities—as secretaries, custodians, grounds keepers and landscapers, painters and carpenters, bus drivers, teachers, teachers' aides, bookkeepers, accountants, budget makers, personnel assistants, middle managers, attorneys, and program directors—are a gateway to middle-class status for high school and first-generation college graduates alike. The jobs range from those that can be performed by school dropouts to those requiring advanced education or professional training. Control of the jobs is highly coveted and is never ceded lightly; the jobs themselves become central battlegrounds for unions, community groups, and local politicians. No politician can afford to ignore them. And very few do.

An emphasis on the economic significance of schools is one of the more troubling insights to come out of this study. At the outset, such a finding was not anticipated. Nonetheless it became apparent, as the study progressed, that pressures for districts to respond to adults' financial demands rather than the children's educational needs is a frustrating reality for many superintendents. Most describe it as "politics" interfering with their educational mission, and politics are almost always about the distribution of jobs and economic benefits.

In the eyes of many of the superintendents interviewed, the task of distributing district resources can overshadow the school district's educational mission. One former superintendent, still active professionally, described the problem bluntly:

> ***"The real problem is that the district is a big pot of money over which adults in and out of the system fight to advance their own interests and careers. Better jobs, higher status, bigger contracts, and career advancement are what's at stake. All the public talk about teaching and learning has to be understood as secondary to that economic dynamic."***

While profoundly troubled by this reality, this veteran educator also acknowledged that his former anger about the situation had mellowed with the passage of time. Recounting how his board had stuck with him on a difficult decision to hire an out-of-town contractor, he described how the board chair was attacked, almost immediately, because she did not support a local vendor's bid for the contract. "The board chair was denounced from every minority pulpit in town and pilloried by the union. She never stuck her head out of the foxhole again. She wasn't willing to expose herself and her family to that kind of punishment in her own community.... How many of us would act differently?"

Another example of the economic pressure driving districts is described by several of the superintendents who complained about competition between employing people in the district and spending resources on new programs or other support systems:

> ***"Politicians ... too often try to exert control.... Mostly all they worry about are jobs and control of the patronage in the district. They actually don't care what the district does in terms of learning."***

> ***"The pressure was to keep everybody employed—employ as many people as you can, don't reduce staff. What we were neglecting was all the other stuff—technology, facilities, equipment—so that you'd go into these buildings and they looked more like prisons than schools. It was just terrible."***

> ***"As a new minority superintendent, you get two distinct reactions from minority staff and teachers within the district. One group hopes you'll finally do something about the achievement gap. The other expects you to protect their jobs."***

> *"Implementing the change required massive reallocation of funds. We [eliminated] thousands of relatively poorly qualified teacher aide positions. Eliminating these jobs provoked a huge backlash from teachers, the teachers union, and from minority communities whose members had come to rely on the aide positions for jobs."*

Other superintendents spoke frankly about more disturbing concerns. Nepotism and patronage rarely turn up in the high-minded discussions of school governance and management theory that consume so much professional time. But judging from the interviews we conducted, pressure from many quarters to hire relatives and friends of those in power remains a common experience for school superintendents.

> *"The system in some districts has turned into a mixture of nepotism, cronyism, and patronage. If you know the right people, went to the right college, and belonged to the right sorority or fraternity, you get a job."*

> *"This is the most unusual district I've seen in terms of the amount of nepotism that existed here when I arrived. The previous board was dysfunctional and consumed with employment issues and jobs."*

It is important to note that the employment function of schools has long been a challenge to good educational practice and sound administration. One of the reviewers of an earlier draft of this report recalled a conversation he held 30 years ago with the leader of a team studying a large-city school board in New England. The leader mentioned that his colleagues on the team had only begun to understand the board's behavior when they stopped viewing it as an education policy body and began to consider it as an employment agency.

A Genuine Problem

Although the emergence of patronage and cronyism to such a visible level in this study was unexpected, the issue seems to have been coming more and more to the forefront around the country. For example, community groups in some of the districts involved in this study have put teachers and teachers' unions on notice that learning has to take precedence over job security. Earlier this year, the New York State legislature turned control of New York City schools over to the mayor in part because of concerns about patronage. The concern

was that political clubs in the city had taken over community school boards and were using their control of the boards in the best tradition of Tammany patronage. Assemblyman Roger L. Green was quoted as follows in the *New York Times*: "The current system has failed our children. It has become corrupted by cronyism and patronage."[2]

The issue is visible beyond the state and local level, as well. Title I, the venerable federal program to help improve the achievement of low-income students, has become an employment program in many communities, according to recent research. Schools spend about $1.1 billion annually from Title I to hire paraprofessional teachers' aides, reports a recent federal study.[3] Yet, in elementary schools with the highest poverty levels, only one in ten of these aides has a four-year degree. Most of them receive two days or less of training. And nearly half report leading classes without a teacher present.

Problems of cronyism and patronage are not restricted to urban areas. A ten-year veteran superintendent interviewed in one of the focus groups was, it turned out, leader of a poverty-stricken, rural school district in the South. When contract-renewal time arrived in 2001, he was offered a contract that required him to accept a list of school employees whose jobs were to be considered "safe," i.e., he could not fire them. He declined to accept the list and the board declined to renew his contract.

For the most part, issues of nepotism, cronyism, and patronage are swept under the rug in the policy discussion about schools. But they represent a genuine problem. Educational quality is hard to maintain if the dynamics of the system and the politics underlying it function to slip barely qualified teachers into the classroom. And the standards-based reform movement will find attaining its goals difficult until policymakers at the state and local level assume responsibility for cleaning up abuses in the hiring process.

When district employment issues take precedence over promising school reforms, something about the way school systems are meant to operate has been perverted. If any warm body in front of the class could provide a first-rate education, it would make little difference if an honors graduate were bumped out of the hiring line by the board chair's second cousin. But warm bodies are not what is required. Teaching challenges in many schools are so severe that only the best-qualified and highly committed candidates should be considered for teaching positions.

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[2] James C. McKinley, Jr., "State Senate Passes Bill Giving Mayor Control of Schools," *New York Times*, June 12, 2002. In some sense this brings school governance full circle. School boards were originally created to protect schools from political interference and allegations of patronage. Whether the Mayor of New York is better able to resist using the schools as sources of patronage than community school boards remains to be seen.

[3] Ronald Brownstein, "Federal Funds Should Educate, Not Just Employ," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2002.

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Chapter 3

Whipsawed Within: Boards, Unions, and the Central Office

Superintendents do not control their own agendas but are whipsawed by the demands of competing power centers within the system.

The emphasis on jobs and patronage forms only part of a larger problem for urban superintendents, as they describe the challenges they face. Superintendents cannot really be sure they have the authority to take charge of the educational agenda of their districts. Although people outside schools are likely to view the school superintendent as an imposing figure possessing impressive authority, the reality of the superintendent's position is more ambiguous. On paper, their managerial span of control is impressive, with central office staff, school principals, and teachers all reporting to the superintendent. But the fact is that superintendents report to school boards, elected or appointed, that frequently micromanage district affairs. In addition, central offices contain a myriad of personal and political relationships that are often used to sabotage, delay, or dilute a superintendent's initiatives.

In our survey, superintendents identified many impediments to effective district-wide leadership. As Figure 1 indicates, overwhelming majorities of responding superintendents described local politics, conflicting public demands, mandates from above, and pressures for accountability as either "moderate" or "major" problems (between 71% and 81% of respondents agreed).[4]

[4] The views of these superintendents of large suburban and urban districts are similar in many ways to what Public Agenda found in its survey of superintendents nationwide. Eighty-eight percent of the Public Agenda sample strongly or somewhat agreed that "keeping up with all the local, state, and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time." Sixty-five percent also agreed, at least somewhat, that "too many school boards would rather hire a superintendent they can control rather than someone with a strong track record and proven leadership skills." *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Technical Appendix* (New York, Public Agenda, 2001), questions 53 and 59.

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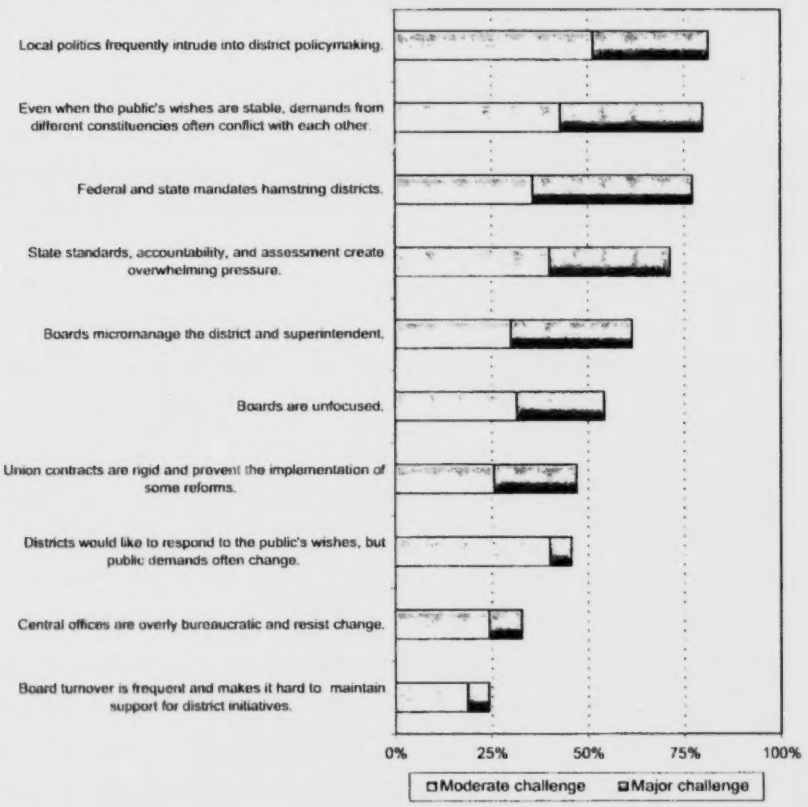
Figure 1.
Challenges to District Leadership


Local politics frequently intrude into district policymaking.
Even when the public's wishes are stable, demands from different constituencies often conflict with each other.
Federal and state mandates hamstring districts.
State standards, accountability, and assessment create overwhelming pressure.
Boards micromanage the district and superintendent.
Boards are unfocused.
Union contracts are rigid and prevent the implementation of some reforms.
Districts would like to respond to the public's wishes, but public demands often change.
Central offices are overly bureaucratic and resist change.
Board turnover is frequent and makes it hard to maintain support for district initiatives.
0%
25%
50%
75%
100%
Moderate challenge
Major challenge

The Board

One central challenge is board micromanagement, that is to say, straying from policy oversight and budget development into the nuts and bolts of day-to-day administration. As Figure 1 shows, a clear majority of surveyed superintendents (61%) agreed that board micromanagement is a "moderate" or "major" problem. Fifty-four percent described lack of board focus as an impediment to district effectiveness. Although some interviewed superintendents spoke positively about their own school boards, the interviews conveyed a sense that boards in general are the problem, not the solution. A common fixture wherever two or more superintendents are gathered together is a lengthy gripe session about dealing with this impossible board, or that troublesome board

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member, or about how the board has started micromanaging the district.

Part of the concern centers on the perception commonly expressed during the interviews that instead of protecting the school district from political pressures, boards have become a main conduit for such pressures. A reform-minded superintendent put it this way:

> ***"I think the system wanted to reject us the way an organism would reject a foreign body. And we needed the board to be part of the vaccination. We needed them to be the protective shield but they weakened as time went on."***

Another respondent identified changes in the quality of board members as a source of increased political pressure:

> ***"In the old days, people who had stature would run for the board of education. We have a lot of situations now where people run for the board to gain stature. These tend to be the people that are most sensitive to political pressures and community groups."***

Whatever the cause, many of the superintendents viewed one of their primary tasks as a struggle to get the board to focus on educational goals. Often this was a losing battle:

> ***"The biggest frustration was that we couldn't get the board to focus on one thing—student achievement."***

> ***"I had lots of exposure to urban boards and in many cases it took you about ten minutes to see that they were a large part of the problem."***

Conflicts within the board itself appear to be endemic, according to the interviews. One superintendent described this problem as among the job's most challenging issues, one that made enormous demands on her energy:

> ***"The management of my board—the distrust they have for each other—[is a huge problem]. Obtaining board peace is a tremendous drain on my time."***

Finally, board micromanagement is mentioned so frequently in these interviews that it has to be taken as a near-universal complaint about the job's structure.

> ***"I think what has happened in the last ten years ... is that boards have gone crazy and are really into micromanaging. I think that's the major problem."***

> ***"Superintendents are at the beck and call of boards. There's just no question about it. You can be vocal and bull-headed, but eventually those who don't support student learning wear you down."***

> ***"The city board has totally micromanaged the school district. I mean totally. Principals went to board members before they would go to the superintendent."***

Another experienced and highly regarded superintendent reported that shortly before he retired, his district elected a board that for the first time began to interfere in managerial decisions. "I'd get calls from staff saying they'd been ordered to do such and such, and I'd have to call the board members and tell them that's not their role."

Teachers' Unions

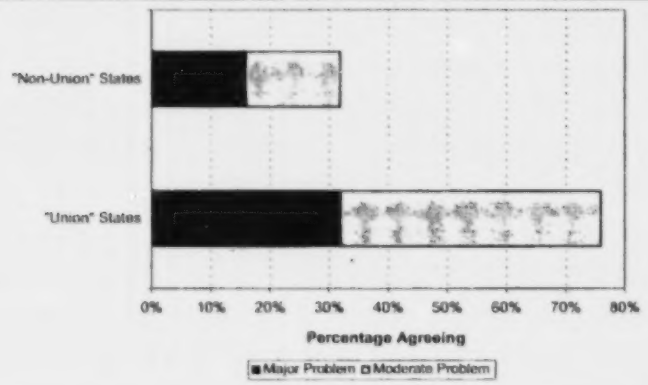
Although the superintendents were most concerned about boards as an internal challenge, many (47% in the survey) also felt that relationships with teachers' unions were barriers to progress. While superintendents indicated clearly during interviews that they understood unions must protect their members' interests, many felt that the unions had focused so exclusively on economic issues that they had lost all sense of educational mission.

Superintendents' views about unions were not uniform. Much depended on whether superintendents presided over districts in states sanctioning collective bargaining or prohibiting it. For convenience, we refer to these as districts in "union" and "non-union" states.[5] As Figure 2 re-

[5] Teachers' unions can be important actors even in states where districts are not allowed to bargain with them. In some "non-union" states, districts are permitted to "meet and discuss" with organizations representing employees. These consultations often cover the same issues as collective bargaining sessions.

veals, superintendents' views differ, depending on whether they work in "union" or "non-union" states. More than two-thirds of superintendents in "union" states cited rigid union contracts that prevent the implementation of some reforms as either a "major" or "moderate" problem. By contrast, less than one in three superintendents from "non-union" states considered union rigidity to be either a "major" or "moderate" challenge.

Figure 2.
Superintendents with Collective Bargaining Are More Concerned About Union Rigidity



Our interviews and focus groups, mostly with superintendents from "rust belt" and west coast districts in "union" states, reinforced this sense of a major problem with teachers' unions.

> ***"The big problem is that the teachers and the union don't take responsibility for education. The union's idea is that it has to protect the membership."***

> ***"We cannot transfer teachers in most districts because of union contracts. You might be able to do it here and there, but it's not possible in most places."***

> ***"When I was hired, the board recognized there was a problem with the unions. The union was running the place."***

The last superintendent quoted above noted that when he assumed his latest position, the union president was more powerful than the deputy su-

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perintendent. The union leader "had gone through many superintendents during his time in the district. He was by far the most powerful person in the district." What troubled this respondent most about this situation was his sense that a "culture of accommodation" had developed between the district and board on one hand, and the union on the other. In accommodating that culture, the district, he thought, had "created a system that was based around the needs of adults as opposed to those of children."

Gulliver in Lilliput

Two superintendents independently described a process of dealing with unions that was akin to Gulliver tied down by the tiny straps immobilizing him in Lilliput. The image was graphic.

> ***"We had this 150-page union contract that contained over a thousand rules. You could use it as a metaphor. You have Gulliver and the Lilliputians. You've got a thousand of these little ropes. None of them in and of itself can hold the system down, but you get enough of them in place ... and the giant is immobilized."***

> ***"I've always supported the idea of unions. But I'm hamstrung. I feel like Gulliver in Lilliput."***

What comes through clearly in these interviews is the growing sense of frustration of urban superintendents forced to deal with external pressures to improve system performance and student learning in the face of union insistence that the first order of priority is pay, and the second is working conditions. Adding to the frustration is the reality that although boards and local politicians will support standards and student performance as system goals in public, in private their interests often align with the union's concern about pay and working conditions.

The Central Office

In the national survey, just one-third of superintendents labeled the school district central office as a moderate or major problem. In the more intensive interviews, however, superintendents from the largest cities cast central offices in a more negative light. Superintendents complained about administrative staff who have been so beaten down that they focused on day-to-day survival rather than student learning. One superintendent complained about the central staff's inertia and lack of energy. He put it this way:

> ***"We had a central office culture that developed around the notion that we're going to run the schools from central office. So we have all these rules and they just have a deadening effect in the schools. Principals would always be reluctant to do anything without permission, but as soon as they asked, there would always be some reason they couldn't do it. So, after years of that, you just develop this culture where people serve their time, wait for direction, and when direction doesn't come, they don't do anything."***

Again and again, the sense came through in these discussions that the central office can be a huge impediment to change. Wedded to traditional ways of doing things and accustomed to watching superintendents come and go, central offices, like most bureaucracies, prefer not to make waves. So the central office became a focal point of sorts for the difficulties several superintendents reported experiencing in leading change:

> ***"My experience—and this is not a very sophisticated concept—is that the less we have of the bureaucracy, the better our schools function. The more areas we have which are in a vacuum, the schools can move into because the vacuum is left by not having somebody from the central office prescribing it."***

> ***"My union was less a barrier than the school board, the central office, and the mayor."***

> ***"The central office often doesn't believe in the changes we're trying to implement. We assign the central office these tasks because that's why they're there, but you have to get hold of the central office, which requires getting hold of the money it now controls."***

One experienced superintendent put the whole problem of dealing with the central office in military terms. He said: "It's not the enemy in front, but the people behind who eventually annihilate you."

Becoming a Pickle

Nontraditional superintendents take a particular view of these issues. People who come into the superintendency from outside government or education are often struck by the resistance to change of the bureaucracies over which they preside. Most have never seen anything like it. Middle management in the private sector is known to be resistant to change, but middle managers in

school districts seem to carry this human tendency to the extreme, according to the interviews. Central office personnel are the people who are supposed to carry out a superintendent's program, but they often seem intent on waiting out the superintendent, who will almost certainly leave before they do.

One nontraditional superintendent found a graphic metaphor to describe the importance of swimming against the tide in the bureaucracy. He told his team (all imported from outside education) that:

> ***"'This is like a cucumber in a pickle jar: we're only going to stay a cucumber for so long—eventually we're going to become a pickle, and when we do, we're going to have to go because we won't be making a contribution.' And I actually think that's what happened."***

The Iron Triangle: A Coalition of Boards, Unions, and the Central Office

Many managers struggle with resistance from their organization's various stakeholders. This is not peculiar to the culture of school districts. In the automobile world, top management frequently finds itself at odds with designers, engineers, or marketing experts. Hi-tech leaders often report splits between the creative side of their empire and the finance side. However, respondents in this study point to a problem that in some ways seems unique to school leadership: not only do the constituencies individually resist a superintendent's authority, but they also join forces to block change. Some of the superintendents report a virtual "iron triangle" made up of boards, unions, and the central office staff, a coalition that can work to block reforms deemed vital.

> ***"Boards are in bed with the unions. The boards say they don't agree with the unions, but their actions say they do. Often the union head is more in tune with what the board chair thinks than the superintendent. Plus, the unions were underwriting campaigns of board members to oppose us."***

> ***"There was this whole level of middle management that would curry favor with board members and board members would approach them for information and you have lots of [middle managers] running to their patrons and their friends and that was politically charged."***

Sometimes the groups successfully block change by forming alliances. At other times, different stakeholder groups frustrate initiatives because they cannot agree among themselves. One superintendent described the difficulties of dealing with both teachers and the teachers' union:

> ***"Teacher and union resistance is a big issue. Unions will not agree to anything that reallocates teachers or requires some to accept different hours or work rules. Even when unions cooperated, teachers in individual schools often blocked change. Many of us are whipsawed—we can get union cooperation or support from the grassroots, but rarely both."***

In practice, the forces against the superintendent can seem overwhelming. Itinerant superintendents, who have shallow roots in the cities they serve, are often only dimly aware of long-established alliances and can do little to resist them. As one retired superintendent said, "We underestimate the intelligence of our opponents and their capacity to organize themselves to oppose change."

All of this adds up to a situation in which success is difficult, if not impossible. Whipsawed from within and under attack from outside, superintendents face a choice between taking bold action that is likely to create lethal levels of opposition, or acting with great caution, which is likely to get them fired for lack of results. Cautious superintendents may last longer but they do not accomplish more. On many days, there is nowhere to turn to find the critical energy for change. Big city superintendents often get ground down by internal conflict, no matter how energetic and well intentioned they are.[6]

[6] Superintendents from non-urban districts seem to share this sentiment. More than eight out of ten of the superintendents surveyed by Public Agenda said that talented superintendents are most likely to leave the field because "they are frustrated by politics and bureaucracy." *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*, question 6.

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Chapter 4

Under Assault from Outside: External Pressure for Reform

Crisis can empower leaders. Although changing and fickle demands from the public are hard to follow, external pressure and even crises can strengthen leaders' hands, enabling changes that would otherwise be impossible.

As if the challenges of distributing economic resources and preserving the authority to manage were not enough to keep the typical superintendent awake at night, superintendents also report considerable pressure on them from outside the system to move in one direction or another. Properly harnessed, this external pressure can help bring about needed district reform.

A Fickle Public: Pressure from Outside the System

As Figure 1 (page 18) shows, superintendents generally are inclined to view external challenges as more of a problem than internal challenges. They are likely to consider external issues such as mandates for accountability to be more challenging problems than internal district challenges such as rigid central offices or union conflict.

What is noteworthy is the extent to which superintendents perceive public demands to be a major challenge. Nobody who has been around education for more than a few days or weeks is surprised to hear that some 78% of superintendents report that mandates and prescriptions are a "major" or "moderate" problem. But the finding that the same proportion of respondents complains about factionalism and competing demands among the public was unexpected. Fully half of responding superintendents also report that it is difficult to respond to public demands since they change so frequently. Clearly, as superintendents attempt to respond to the public's wishes, they experience difficulty interpreting the signals they are receiving.

There are many groups with different agendas for district change. Parent organizations, community interest groups, business leaders, and the religious community all have different, sometimes conflicting, views about what the district should be doing. Their support or opposition

to a district's agenda can vary by issue. So the same parent group that gets behind the superintendent's plans for a new approach to reading or a decision to eliminate candy machines in school halls, may show up at school board meetings to protest student testing or to oppose letting students out of school early so that teachers can participate in training.

Attending to all of these interests, and their political consequences, makes it difficult to form a coherent district plan for change. It is hard to maintain focus on long-term systemic improvement in the face of a balkanized public with many competing demands.

One district leader described the dizzying list of interests pressuring for their own agenda:

> ***"You have the mayor and the county manager who think that they have the right answer and ... they want to advance their agenda. You have the business community which thinks that what they're doing makes sense and ... they're applying pressure. You've got some school board members who want to do the old thing.... You've got a very strong union president who still wanted to be part of everything.... So there were a lot of different forces that one needed to contend with. And all of that generates its own level of stress."***

Another superintendent described the patchwork of groups and shifting alliances:

> ***"We're a city of disparate neighborhoods.... The city is very factional and you always have to put together a coalition [to get things done]. The problem is you can never maintain that same coalition. It tends to vary issue to issue so you have to keep reforming coalitions around the big issues."***

All of the superintendents acknowledged that they need public support to get the job done. One nontraditional superintendent summed up what he had learned: grassroots support is indispensable and it is up to him, not the instructional experts, to seek and keep it.

Pressure from Community Groups

From a superintendent's perspective, pressure from community groups can be a blessing or a curse. Community activists can call education issues to the media's attention and shine a public spotlight

on the district. In one district, for example, the clergy, community-based organizations, and business leaders began to monitor the actions of the union. They made it clear that issues greater than adult working conditions mattered to them, pressing the union to change or to face a statement of "no confidence" from the community.

It requires effective leadership to manage community support to the benefit of the reform initiative. As one superintendent put it:

> ***"Engaging the broader community, the business community, the university community, and the parents to support what it is that you're doing [is important]. And it's orchestrating all of that and keeping things at a high level of pitch in order to move things forward, and that means getting the unions to work with you and support what you're doing."***

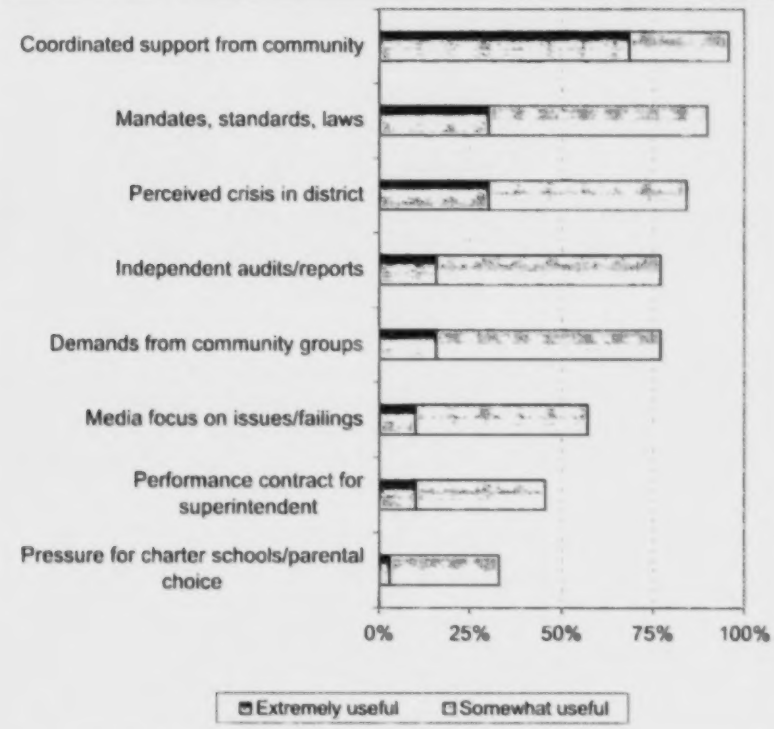
Pressure from community groups that comes in the form of support can be extremely useful in bringing reform to a district. One superintendent spoke about how he worked strategically to get powerful community groups to back his reform agenda, leading to a better reception from the broader community when it came time to pass a levy:

> ***"If you can start off with a combination of a business community and religious community on the same page, you can get pretty far towards this. Our business community will provide the financial support. They're relatively impotent in terms of the political process because they never live in the city. But if you can get 110 Baptist ministers moving in the same direction, well, this is a city where people like their ministers. Ministers still tell them what to do from the pulpit on Sunday and how to vote."***

The Value of Pressure from Outside the District

Yet, when push comes to shove and superintendents need to find ways to encourage change and reform in their districts, the external pressures that had been a "challenge" and even a distraction often become the superintendent's ally. Used skillfully by adroit leaders, these pressures—whether in the form of community demands, legal mandates, crises, or criticism of the district—can be turned into powerful levers for reform. And, as Figure 3 demonstrates, the vast majority of superintendents recognize that many outside pressures on the district can be either "extremely" or "somewhat" useful in encouraging change.

Figure 3.
Superintendents Understand External Pressures Can Advance Change



Coordinated Community Support

Clearly, as Figure 3 reveals, if superintendents do not always welcome community pressure, they almost always recognize the value of widespread community support. When asked if coordinated support from the community is helpful in advancing change, superintendents are nearly unanimous in agreeing that it is. About 96% find such support either "somewhat" or "extremely" useful. Even demands from community groups—perhaps not always couched in supportive terms—are thought to be either "somewhat" or "extremely" useful by about 75% of responding superintendents.

Mandates, Standards, and Crises

Just as constituents bring a variety of opinions and pressures to bear on district leaders, superintendents also find themselves increas-

ingly under pressure from outside the immediate system to change and improve it. Among the most frequently mentioned issues encouraging change are mandates from federal and state authorities, a perceived crisis in the district, performance contracts between districts and superintendents, intense scrutiny from outside the district itself, and legislation encouraging new governance arrangements.

Most superintendents favor many of these pressures, as Figure 3 confirms. They apparently find them helpful in gaining momentum for change.

Federal and State Mandates

Although superintendents and other school officials frequently complain about mandates from federal and state officials, many of these complaints, after a while, take on a ritualistic aspect. The complaint is offered almost as though the speaker believes the listener expects to hear it. Indeed, as seen in the prior chapter, about 78% of superintendents report that external mandates are a "moderate" or major" problem with which they have to deal.

But, as Figure 3 indicates, the perception of the issue is reversed when considered against the challenge of encouraging change in local districts. Now, eight out of ten superintendents are not complaining about outside pressure but agreeing that outside pressure in the form of mandates and legislation is helpful. It is easy to see why. Schools are intensely local institutions. Superintendents interested in improving learning for disadvantaged students (or in shifting resources within the district from one program to another) have a bullet-proof response to local critics if they can point to a national or state program compelling them to do what they want to do.

The Push for Accountability and Standards

With the advent of standards-based reform, many superintendents have been given the outside push they needed to focus their districts on instruction. Though not everyone agrees with all of the elements of standards and testing, superintendents by and large accept them as a given. The new standards systems provide a concrete set of goals toward which districts and schools can aim. The assessments, in addition, give them something, however crude, against which to base judgments about school improvement.

Because these demands come to the district from the state (and more recently from the federal government in the form of "Leave No Child Behind"), they provide superintendents with a leverage they did not earlier have to focus the entire district on improving learning, no easy task. One new, nontraditional superintendent was surprised that student achievement received no attention in the district's statement of mission.

> ***"I asked him to find me a copy of the mission statement. Two weeks later he comes back with this four-page document in which the words 'student achievement' didn't appear. I went to the board and I said, 'I've completed task one. We don't have a clue what our purpose is.' "***

But this particular superintendent quickly found something that distressed him equally—the lack of a common curriculum, indicating inability to agree on what this district was trying to provide to all its students:

> ***"To me, the most bizarre thing was when it finally dawned on me that there was no curriculum.... And no one was talking about it. It was as though they took this for granted. And it was one of those blinding flashes of the obvious. I finally said out loud, 'We don't have a curriculum, do we?' "***

A Perceived Crisis in the District

At first blush, superintendents' enthusiasm for a crisis as a lever for change was surprising. Perhaps it should not have been; savvy leaders often understand that change is easier to develop and lead in the midst of crisis than when most people are comfortable with the existing order of things.

It's clear from Figure 3 that many superintendents view a crisis in the district as an opportunity to move forward with change. More than one quarter view such developments as "extremely" useful and another half as "moderately" useful.

This finding was also reflected in several of the interviews. It seems that when a district is in crisis, the school board and the public are often motivated to allow bold moves to be taken to turn around the situation, moves that normally would have been beyond consideration.

One urban board hired a local firm to run the district because the board, growing concerned about the district's academic reputation, felt it essential to demonstrate it was taking bold action. As it turned out, although the board hired this firm in response to the crisis, board members were more interested in making the crisis disappear than in changing anything. As the head of the team installed by that firm recalls:

> ***"We said to the board, 'Don't hire us unless you want change.' And they hired us and we said, 'Oh, they want change!' But it turns out they hired us to make the crisis go away. So here we are, making change. It's not exactly what they thought they wanted."***

Other superintendents taking over in a crisis situation seem to have had better results. One superintendent leading a district in a state takeover believed that the union felt compelled to work with him because of the seriousness of the situation. In addition, the takeover provided him with tools (reconstitution, chartering authority, and privatization) that he would not otherwise have enjoyed:

> ***"We're entitled to grant waivers for teacher certification and employ special hiring procedures. We have a little more clout in dealing with union contracts to get things done."***

Independent Reports

Sometimes there is nothing quite as powerful in getting people to focus as a respected outside perspective on the problems facing a district. At least two interviewed superintendents brought up outside audits as one way to encourage district focus. And about three-quarters of survey respondents agreed that such independent audits can be helpful.

One superintendent arrived in his new district to find that his board was split 5-4 on just about every issue. In addition, the board was inclined to try to set the superintendent running "in a million directions at once." In frustration he set out to get the board to agree on priorities by turning to a major local public university:

> ***"[The university team] implemented a very broad-based needs assessment.... I got there in September, it was designed in October, administered in November, ... processed in December, and it was presented to the board in January. And I said to the board, 'You know, I can't do everything. Here is data from employees in the district, from yourselves as board members, from parents of kids in the public schools, parents of kids in private and parochial schools, community leaders, et cetera.' We had data from all of these groups. 'And they all say the same thing about these six priorities.' And the board came together to vote on six priorities ..."***

A nontraditional superintendent reported that the impetus for change in his district was provoked by what he called a "brutal performance audit" of the district by a state legislative committee. Far from being sought by the incumbent superintendent, the audit was not welcome and helped speed his exit. The audit confirmed city leaders' worst fears about the district, energizing them to upgrade the school board and think boldly about hiring someone from outside the educational mainstream as superintendent.

> ***"A turning point in our district was a very critical legislative report, a brutal performance audit on our schools. It was a stunning criticism of the performance of both the board and the superintendent and it helped create a promising new board. The new board was made up of people who wanted a common vision, who were collegial and respectful of each other and of educators, and who also demanded change."***

Well-informed Media Attention

The skilled superintendent also values media attention, sometimes even when that attention underscores district failings. What a board or parental group will not accept from the superintendent sometimes becomes more palatable when written up in the local newspaper. About half of responding superintendents reported that the media's focus on the schools, including district problems, could be "somewhat" or "extremely" useful in encouraging change.

Urban schools and their superintendents are magnets for news stories, a reality that many of the superintendents we interviewed readily acknowledged:

> ***"In any metropolitan center, the school district is a natural focus of attention from newspapers, television, and ambitious politicians, if only because of its size and economic clout."***

> ***"As superintendent, not a day goes by that there isn't some contact with the media. I never thought I would see the day that, three days in the same week, the school district could be the front-page story in the newspaper."***

> ***"Managing the messages, the image, the vision of the district. It never ends. Out of town last week, I spent a lot of time on the phone with two reporters from back home."***

Some superintendents also use the media to publicize elements of their reform initiatives, to explain them to their own staff as well as the public. One nontraditional superintendent said quite frankly that he tries to use the media strategically. He considers access to media outlets to be an asset in urban districts. He also explained that he uses the media to send a message—to "communicate with our own staff through the newspaper."

> ***"Media attention, if you manage it, is incredibly powerful if you get it on your side. And, you know, last year I fired four principals. Well, if that happened in [a nearby suburb], it never would have been reported. In the city, it was a front-page headline with extra large type."***

A Performance Contract for the Superintendent

Performance contracts between the board and the superintendent received lukewarm endorsement, at best, in the survey. Although nearly half (44%) of respondents thought they might be useful (see Figure 3, page 30), more than three out of four of those people selected the relatively benign "somewhat useful." Judging from the survey, there is little danger of an epidemic breaking out in which superintendents seek performance contracts with their boards.

However, during the interviews, two of the nontraditional superintendents went out of their way to describe the performance contracts under which they operated and both, clearly, considered the agreements and the specificity they brought to the relationship with their boards to be positive and helpful. Such a contract can serve in schools, as elsewhere in business and commercial life, as a tool to clarify objectives, agree on strategies, and focus district action. These contracts allow the superintendent and the board to outline their priorities and then agree on how to pursue them. If an outcome is important to the board, it can make this clear by outlining the result desired in the contract. If the outcome is relatively unimportant, its absence from the contract protects the superintendent from arbitrary board actions. This can prevent personal relationships from becoming an employment issue—if something is not in the contract, the board cannot evaluate the superintendent on it.

One of these superintendents described his contract as very complex but also very concrete. The goals of the district are clearly reflected in this agreement.

> ***"Now, 60% of the evaluation is based upon three quantitative measures and 40% is based upon achieving strategies that we feel are necessary in any given year to advance the strategic plan.... I've got three or four measures in that first 60% and they deal with overall the increase of student achievement in the district, 27 indicators.... The second one deals with ... my ability to raise achievement in the lowest performing schools.... Then there's another one that deals with the number of state standards we meet in the state accountability plan.... Then the other 40%, every year I submit a set of strategies ... and we go through these and eventually agree. Last year one of the big ones was to develop a better approach to early literacy; use time as a variable. Out of that grew our mandatory extension***

> ***of the school year for students who are not reading at grade level."***

The other superintendent explained that his firm's contract with the district provided for paying the firm for demonstrating results against the board's priorities. His firm's district team had a clear incentive to tackle major issues first.

> ***"The very first thing we did after we were selected was to sit down with the Board and actually make a list of tasks that the Board said needed to be accomplished.... And to give you a feeling, one task was get a curriculum.... So there were 44 of those if I remember right and ... every one of those items had a dollar value assigned to it. And as we got those done we would get paid and that was the only way we got paid. So we had a lot of incentive to get those tasks out of the way."***

This superintendent also discovered that the performance contract became a way to shield himself against random board requests for action on every problem that came before it. Insisting that this was a performance contract, not an employment contract, he could simply point out to board members that several of their requests were not called for under the performance agreement:

> ***"We really tried to get the board to stay focused on that stuff and not ask us in between to go off and do all kinds of other stuff—put out this fire, and make sure this family gets that benefit, or find textbooks for these people. We would politely but regularly say, 'Gee, that's not part of our performance agreement.'"***

Legislation Forcing New Governance

A number of cities and states have initiated legislation to change how schools are governed. Mayoral and state takeovers, charter school laws, voucher programs, appointed boards, nontraditional superintendents—all of these actions offer the possibility of deep-rooted change. But just as they can open up new arenas in which leaders can operate, they can also provoke considerable local turmoil and political upheaval.

Interestingly, of all the options for generating momentum for change presented to the survey respondents, the most tepid response was reserved for "charter schools and other forms of parental choice" (see Figure 3). While large majorities favored outside pressure in the form of mandates and standards, two-thirds of respondents refused to endorse charters or parental choice. Nearly half thought such pressure would be

"rarely useful" and another 20% were convinced it was "not useful" at all.

Still, about one-third of respondents considered choice and charters "somewhat" or "extremely" useful—a proportion that is undoubtedly much higher than it would have been a decade ago had the question been raised then.

These specific findings are difficult to interpret. The terms "charter" and "choice" are often thought to be stalking horses for "vouchers." This survey was completed before the U.S. Supreme Court deemed Cleveland's voucher program to be constitutional. It may have been that respondents were responding to a sense that this question was asking about vouchers. It is also possible that most of the leaders of the nation's largest school districts find any reference to choice or charter schools distasteful. What makes this difficult to interpret is that under the right circumstances, superintendents are attracted to the idea of charter and contract schools, as will become apparent in Chapter 8.

In addition, although there were no statistically significant differences in the ratings that various groupings of superintendents gave the various options, charter schools and other forms of parental choice received more interest from superintendents in "more-complex" districts and from minority superintendents.[7] Table 1 below provides the relevant data.

Table 1.
Leaders of More-Complex Districts Find Choice Pressures More Useful

District Type - Superintendent	% finding pressures for charter schools/parent choice "useful" or "extremely useful"
Less-complex—white leader	13%
Less-complex—minority leader	33%
More-complex—white leader	46%
More-complex—minority leader	57%

[7] See Appendix B, Methods (page 83), for a description of districts. The study divided them into "more-complex" and "less-complex" based on variables such as size, number of schools, and proportion of students who are poor or members of minority groups

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As Table 1 indicates, while only 13% of white superintendents in less-complex districts indicated that pressures for choice provided some momentum for change, 46% in more-complex districts did so. Meanwhile, more than 57% of minority superintendents in more-complex districts agreed. Although not a predominant pressure, being the least favored overall of the possibilities presented, choice pressures are obviously greater in more- rather than in less-complex districts.

Crisis Is Good for the Soul

What all of this appears to add up to is a sense that crisis is the ally of reform. Although constituency politics can be distracting and difficult to manage, external pressure on the district or the eruption of a major crisis may help free up leadership and permit actions that are unacceptable in the ordinary course of events. State takeovers, "brutal" legislative reviews, and independent audits by local news teams or other respected community organizations can have the effect of powerfully concentrating local attention. Crisis, in fact, can be good for the educational soul.

Chapter 5

Leaving Many Children Behind

Although some districts are making progress in improving the performance of minority students, the skill in shortest supply is the ability to close the achievement gap.

As noted in earlier chapters, superintendents often have trouble focusing their districts on teaching and learning. But even when attention does focus on what students know or should know, the precise description of which students should be learning what can cause bitter local argument. While policymakers may line up to approve formulations such as the new "No Child Left Behind" legislation, which changes a 40-year old program of federal aid to low-income elementary and secondary school students, not everyone in local communities applauds, according to responding superintendents.

Although the goal of enhancing learning for all children has broad appeal, in practice, a school district is composed of many different groups of children who are perceived, particularly by parents, to have many different needs. Lack of consensus about whose needs should be met first can make the superintendent's job extremely difficult. There is no doubt that "No Child Left Behind" is still an aspiration; millions of children are being left behind—and race and class stand as fair proxies to describe those who benefit the most and the least.

When superintendents talk about student learning, they often refer to an "achievement gap" between middle class children and those from a lower socio-economic status (who often are members of minority groups as well). For urban superintendents, one of the most important tasks in assisting student learning is to concentrate on those who are most at-risk educationally to try to close this gap. During the interviews conducted as part of this study, all superintendents—majority and minority, men and women—universally agreed on the nature and severity of the challenge. Nobody said, in effect, this is not a problem or the problem is overstated. Here are typical comments:

> ***"No question about it. There are huge problems in terms of minority dropout rates and the achievement gap."***

"Oh, yes. Just like most urban districts, we had major issues with minority dropout rates and the achievement gap."

"The achievement gap is a very big problem. In my former district, Hispanics and African-Americans range from the bottom quartile to the lower end of the third quartile; low-income Caucasians range from the middle of the second quartile to the middle of third; and middle class whites range from the middle of the top quartile to the 90th percentile."

The survey results, as well, show that most superintendents are deeply troubled by the achievement gap. Nine out of ten (89%) "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement that "The racial achievement gap between students is a critical and chronic challenge." Across the board, therefore, widespread agreement exists that the achievement gap is perhaps the compelling educational issue of our time.

Addressing the achievement gap is complicated by an issue that is rarely put on the table publicly. Low expectations about the potential of low-income and minority children is often an issue, sometimes overt, but mostly operating behind the scenes.

"The biggest problem is getting people in the district to 'own' the results of their work, particularly for poor children and children of color."

One superintendent new to his district reported on these low expectations for children of color as a "clandestine" issue:

"About 85% of the students are African-American and about 60% of the teachers are white. Most of the teachers also live outside the district. The perception of many of the teachers that the students are unable to perform is sort of a clandestine issue."

Whether or not low expectations are the crux of the achievement gap, that nation's largest districts all struggle with issues of race and class, as this comment revealed:

"Race and class are challenges here and in every city. Some 70-80% of the staff is female and the vast majority are white. Student enrollment is 60% students of color. So there are a lot of opportunities for misunderstandings,

particularly around minority males. Issues of race, class, and gender are an undertone in a lot of our conversations."

Can We Close the Gap?

With regard to whether current efforts to eliminate the achievement gap are likely to be enough, the study received different answers from survey respondents, who were asked to put their answers on paper, and interviewees, who were interviewed personally and in depth.

Of the superintendents surveyed who see the achievement gap as a critical and chronic challenge, a majority (67%) believe that the programs the district has in place are capable of closing the gap within 5 years. In contrast, interviewed superintendents felt that what they were currently able to do was not enough.

This split might reflect objectively different realities, with some districts facing deeper problems than others. But the split might also reflect differences in the questions asked and the setting in which they were answered. Superintendents responding to the survey were cautious and seldom took strong positions. Superintendents in face-to-face interviews, especially when these were done in the context of meetings and focus groups attended by many other superintendents, were more blunt.

Interviewees emphasized that when superintendents focus on the achievement gap, they quickly encounter opposition from the parents of children who are less at risk, especially white and middle-class parents. These parents harbor a number of specific concerns. On the one hand, middle class parents resist reallocation of resources to more stressed schools fearing that those funds will be taken from the budgets of schools attended by their own children.

"To close the achievement gap, you need to be able to change how every dollar is spent. This means reallocating funds away from existing programs and maybe even schools in middle class neighborhoods."

"Middle class parents are often the biggest challenge. They want their children's schools unchanged. It matters a lot to them that their schools have lots of languages and lots of science options; they also know that major investments in schools serving the disadvantaged would threaten what they now enjoy."

> *"One of the most difficult things has been addressing this issue of access. We've discovered ... that some kids did not have access to the learning.... We were doing things with gifted kids that needed to be done with basic kids, and the basic kids weren't learning because they weren't being taught."*

A related issue, because it is also budgetary, involves a tension between the need to change programs on a district-wide basis versus the need for specialized programs for disadvantaged children. This dilemma sometimes makes it impossible for superintendents to create programs for the disadvantaged children. As one superintendent put it, "The idea that any improvement must be approved as a district-wide initiative means that middle-class parents' tastes will always prevail."

The upshot, in part, is that superintendents find themselves talking a good game of reform, but many believe that what they are doing will not significantly affect the achievement gap.

> *"The achievement gap is the core problem in every district. Most superintendents are doing things they know can't really work."*

> *"We are constantly choosing between initiatives that might work, but would get you fired, and initiatives that are too weak to do much but might survive long enough to make a little bit of difference."*

What Needs to Be Done?

In one of the focus groups, the sense was palpable that window dressing is the best that can be said for much of what is being done with regard to closing the achievement gap.

Members of this group had little trouble saying what they thought needed to be done. All said that to close the achievement gap it is necessary to do different things for the most disadvantaged children than for those in the middle class. Doing different things, they said, would require reallocating money and personnel. They talked about improving teaching staff quality, creating all-literacy primary schools, offering reading-focused pre-schools to poor children only, ungraded primary schools to eliminate the stigma of children being held back, back-to-basics and charter schools, longer school years for disadvantaged students, and even boarding schools for children in abusive or dangerous homes.

Unfortunately, there was near-universal agreement that these badly needed reforms are mostly a pipe-dream. The interviews emphatically underlined superintendents' inability, under current circumstances, to do very much about this situation, as well as their frustration about lack of authority to do what needs to be done to address the achievement gap. Superintendents, not surprisingly, felt that teacher quality is one of the most critical factors in turning around an underachieving school. One superintendent said:

> ***"If I had a magic wand, I'd put the best teachers where they are most needed. I would define 'best' as some combination of educational background and demonstrated success working with all kids."***

In practice, however, respondents recognize this is currently not practical. Inner city schools are often magnets for the least experienced and least adequate teachers.

> ***"[A] real issue is inequitable distribution of experienced teachers along with a lack of concern in the district and among the general public with [the] need to close [the] achievement gap."***

> ***"Teacher distribution does involve inequities. New and inexperienced teachers continue to concentrate in low-income schools. Inner city schools are revolving doors in some cities. To succeed, a school needs a core group that understands what it's doing. If everyone's inexperienced, nobody knows what they're doing."***

> ***"Teachers are always leaving the lowest performing schools as fast as they can get out. So the effects of professional development never accumulate there."***

Here again, of course, unions tend to be a major factor, preventing the superintendent from putting the best teachers in the schools that most need them. Many superintendents, in other words, do not have the authority necessary to take the first steps in shaping a response to the achievement gap, making sure students with the greatest needs are served by the best teachers. For that matter, they have little authority even to reward or dismiss the adults who most directly affect student learning: classroom teachers.

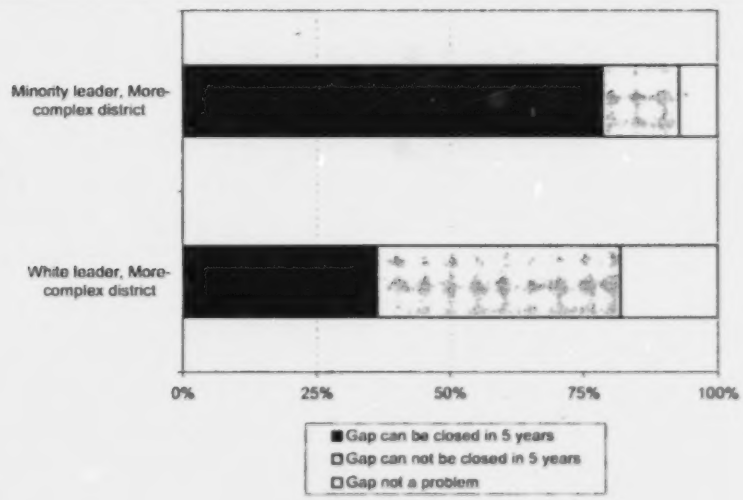
Race and District Complexity as Factors in Superintendents' Responses

Both the race of the superintendent and the complexity of the district affect the response to the survey question about the possibility of closing the achievement gap. Figure 4 demonstrates these contrasts between superintendents from more-complex districts (defined as districts in bigger cities, with larger enrollments, more schools and both more minority students and more students living in poverty).

Some superintendents, both majority and minority, deny the existence of an achievement gap. Nearly one in eight white superintendents (13%) reported that the gap is not a problem. Only one in 16 minority superintendents (6%) shared that view.

Interestingly, for both white and minority superintendents, those in more-complex districts are more likely to report that the gap is not a problem than are those in less-complex districts. About twice as many white superintendents in highly complex districts agreed the gap is not a problem as those in less-complex districts, 18% compared to 10%. Although 7% of minority leaders of highly complex districts reported the gap is not a problem, no minority superintendent in a less-complex district did so.

Figure 4.
In More-Complex Districts, Minority Superintendents Are Less Likely to Dismiss Achievement Gap and More Optimistic About Closing It



It is difficult to interpret these results. Some superintendents may have felt uncomfortable making racial achievement comparisons. Others may have genuinely believed that an achievement gap is not a problem "in my district." It is also conceivable that racial minorities are so highly concentrated in some more-complex districts that the achievement gap as traditionally understood is meaningless in these districts since few white students are enrolled.

Beyond that, we find a paradox. Although, in general, minority superintendents are much less likely than white superintendents to dismiss the existence of an achievement gap, they are also much more likely to believe the gap can be closed in the next five years. Some 77% of minority superintendents "agree" or "strongly agree" on that timeline, while only 53% of white superintendents do so (see Figure 4). Closer analysis of this data indicates that although white superintendents in less-complex districts are more inclined to be optimistic about the possibilities of closing the gap in five years (65%), those in more-complex districts are markedly less so, with just 36% agreeing on the five-year timeline.

Once again, it is difficult to interpret these findings. Perceptions, attitudes, and value systems may lie at the root of these differences. It is possible that minority superintendents view the achievement gap as their primary personal and professional challenge and believe they have the will and the tools to meet it. Meanwhile, white superintendents in the most highly complex districts may view financial issues or pressures of state accountability systems as the major issues, while finding little reason to be optimistic that the gap can be closed in five years. Without additional information about the gaps in the specific districts, it is hard to know whether the optimism or the pessimism is more justified.

Despite the misgiving of a fairly sizeable group of surveyed superintendents, the reality is that most superintendents, whether minority or white, agree that they will have the problem of the achievement gap under control in half a decade.

The confidence of most of the superintendents in the survey stands in stark contrast to the opinions of interviewed minority superintendents. These interviewees were not sanguine about the prospect of closing the achievement gap in the near future. It is conceivable that those surveyed were speculating about their ability to close the gap if able to do what they think needs to be done. It is also possible that those interviewed, several of them retired, were unable to sustain the sense of idealism and efficacy that sustained them earlier in their careers.

The superintendents who were interviewed reported they are unable to do the minimal things necessary to make a start in closing the gap. They were up-front about the frustration they experience due to their inability to put the best teachers where they are most needed. They have trouble focusing resources on schools, classrooms, and children

needing the most help. Even these elementary, small first efforts, so clearly essential to any effort to close the gap are beyond their authority.

The confidence of the survey respondents, therefore, that the achievement gap can be closed in five years remains a promise that cannot be verified one way or the other. The superintendents responding to the survey appear to be relying on their hopes, not their experience.

The Skill in Shortest Supply

Despite these distinctions, the skill that seems to be in shortest supply is the ability to close the achievement gap. Although some schools and districts are making headway, no district has figured out how to successfully overcome the problem year-in and year-out and maintain progress for the same cohort of students over time.

This is an issue that continues to persist across the nation, and it is fast becoming the number one goal facing urban district leaders. Urban superintendents often believe this was the one challenge they were hired to overcome, and that it may well be the major indicator of their effectiveness in the local judgment. To date, neither education professionals nor bold outsiders have been able to come successfully to grips with this challenge.

Chapter 6 The Jury Is Still Out

While nontraditional superintendents try to think outside the box, they are struggling with the same issues as their traditional peers and their success is by no means assured.

In the last decade, hiring high-visibility superintendents from outside the educational mainstream has been one of the most intriguing developments in public school administration. Those hired have included retired military generals, prominent attorneys, former business officials, and even a former professional basketball player and community activist.

Frequently these "nontraditional" hires have come about following mayoral or state take-overs, or a determined effort by local community and business elites to seize control of the elected school board and import new leadership. In the case of Washington, D.C., the U.S. Congress layered an appointed financial-control board on top of the elected school board and city council, which hired a former military leader to head the school district. This situation developed amidst the complicated politics of federal control of the national capital and a general perception of incompetence, cronyism, and patronage throughout city government. In all cases, the expectation was that new and different leadership would lead to better and more promising school results.

Not surprisingly, school insiders have often reacted negatively to the idea that someone without previous experience in schools could do a better job than a long-time veteran. When Public Agenda asked superintendents nationwide about this topic, a scant 3% supported the idea of hiring superintendents from outside the field. Ninety-seven percent thought that districts would be better off with "experienced educators."[8]

Because of the districts involved in the Center's survey, the survey automatically picked up many of the nontraditional big-city superintendents still in office in the Spring of 2002. In addition, the survey purposefully over-sampled nontraditional superintendents, so that this chapter is able to draw on responses from not 70 respondents, but 74, a number reflecting four additional nontraditional superintendents counted here as a result of the over-sample. (The views of these four additional superintendents

[8] *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Technical Appendix*, question 64.

are not reflected in the other chapters of this report.) Finally, the interviews consciously sought out several nontraditional superintendents.

In both the interviews and the survey, the Center was interested in understanding how these nontraditional superintendents differed from their more traditional peers, how they understood their positions, and whether or not their different leadership styles were producing the achievement results anticipated.

Responding Superintendents

Table 2 displays the basic demographics of the survey respondents. Several things stand out in the table: the striking absence of women among the nontraditional superintendents; the large proportion of both traditional and nontraditional superintendents who are certified,[9] and the relatively lengthy tenure in office enjoyed by both groups.

Table 2.
Basic Description of Survey Respondents

Superintendent	Proportion of Survey	Gender	Percent Minority	More-complex district	Average Years in Current Position	Certified in District/ State
Traditional (N=62)	84%	77% male	26%	50%	9.0 years	89%
Nontraditional (N=12)	16%	100% male	17%	58%	5.8 years	67%

Gender and Race

Most school superintendents in the United States are men. Nationally, only about one out of ten is a woman. In large districts, more women seem to be superintendents—nearly one in four among the superintendents responding to the Center's survey (23%). Yet every nontraditional superintendent responding to the survey is a male—and the survey came close to sampling the universe of nontraditional superintendents in large districts.

Despite the "glass ceiling" said to block women's access to leadership positions in business, government, and the professions, a few women have made it to the highest level in all of these areas. They range from Fortune

[9] See the survey in Appendix C on the definition of a traditional versus a nontraditional superintendent. Superintendents who think of themselves as "nontraditional" or "break-the-mold" thinkers could not define themselves as nontraditional. The definitions in each category were quite explicit.

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500 CEOs and U.S. Supreme Court justices to members of the President's cabinet. Obviously there are women from nontraditional backgrounds who are up to the challenges of the urban superintendency. Elsewhere in education, for example, women occupy prominent leadership roles at the state level, in places like Ohio, Maryland, and Washington. And, in recent years, women have begun to occupy the president's office in prestigious universities, including Ivy League universities and flagship land-grant institutions. Yet not a single woman can be found among the nontraditional superintendents in the nation's largest school districts.

It appears that when districts seek a nontraditional superintendent they are inclined to select a man. Indeed, it is not too much to say, based on the Center's survey results, that when pushing the envelope about superintendents' backgrounds, districts disproportionately favor white men: Only 17% of nontraditional respondents are members of minority groups, compared to 26% of traditional superintendents.

Certification

In light of recent professional attention devoted to certification requirements for superintendents, it is something of a surprise to learn that one in ten traditional superintendents is not certified in their district or state. It may be, however, that several respondents only recently arrived in their current districts from elsewhere where they did hold a superintendent's certificate.

Yet the proportion of nontraditional superintendents who are certified (67%) is even more unexpected. Several things may account for this finding. First, some states (e.g., Colorado, Florida, and Washington) in effect encourage nontraditional backgrounds in the superintendency. In these states, local boards determine the requirements for the superintendency. Second, emergency certification for people from nontraditional backgrounds in the form of waivers and the like is permissible just about everywhere. In California and Louisiana, for example, the state board routinely waives statewide requirements for the superintendency at the request of a local board. In effect, both types of superintendent can consider themselves "certified."

It would appear that certification requirements are not the barrier to entry to the superintendency that most assume them to be.

Experience

The tenure of both nontraditional and traditional superintendents is also surprisingly high, in light of traditional wisdom. The statistic that the urban superintendency turns over ever 2.5 years is so frequently cited that it is taken as gospel virtually everywhere educators gather. But it appears to be a highly problematic "fact."

Although the Council of Great City Schools in October 2001 released a report indicting that *current* superintendents in the group's 56 districts had, on average, been on the job 2.5 years, it is by no means clear how long, on average, they will remain on the job.[10] Being on the job 2.5 years is not the end of their tenure. In examining the tenure of *past* superintendents in the nation's 50 largest districts, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) announced in February 2002 that average completed tenure was 4.6 years.[11] It seems that the large urban superintendency is more stable than conventional wisdom acknowledges.

The Center's findings, although not parallel to NSBA's, tend to support them. The average tenure in the current position of the Center's respondents from the nation's 100 largest districts is a relatively high 8.2 years. While this figure is considerably higher than the average reported by NSBA, it confirms the point that superintendent tenure is currently much more stable than many people believe. It should also be noted that although NSBA's figures relate to the 50 largest school districts, the Center's statistics cover superintendents in 70 of the nation's 100 largest districts (plus an additional four nontraditional superintendents).

Still, the central point is hard to avoid. The superintendents responding to this survey, whether traditional or nontraditional, substantially exceed the experience and tenure thought to be associated with school leadership in large districts. Traditional superintendents, in particular, are highly experienced school administrators.

How Unconventional Are They?

It is not clear how unconventional in approach the new breed of superintendent really is. When superintendents confront the challenges of their positions, their prior backgrounds do not necessarily predict the approach they will choose. From neither the interviews nor the survey do we get a sense that career education professionals will challenge the system. Although the new outsiders tend to think more boldly, the boldness takes the form of imposing greater clarity and focus on the district's operations.

[10] See Rhea Borja, "Study: Urban School Chiefs' Tenure is 4.6 Years," *Education Week*, February 6, 2002.

[11] Borja, February 6, 2002. Although the problem does not seem to be part of either the Council of Great City Schools' study or that of the National Association of School Boards, there is also an issue in some of these tenure studies of how multiple superintendencies in the same district are counted. It is thought, for example, that Kansas City, Missouri had nearly 20 superintendents (including deputies acting in that capacity) over a 25 year period. At one point in the 1990s, Hartford, Connecticut had five superintendents in a six-year span. These administrative nightmares naturally get a lot of attention, but if all these administrative changes were added indiscriminately into an "average" of what happens in the 50 largest districts, they would undoubtedly skew the results.

In neither the interviews with nontraditional superintendents, nor the survey, do we find any of them suggesting anything radically different from the new conventional wisdom about how to improve schools. Nobody suggested ending compulsory schooling at age 16. Nobody boldly proclaimed a belief in contracting for school operations. Calls for flexibility were oriented, by and large, around leadership flexibility, not around greater consumer flexibility. And, whereas the current system of K-12 education was established long before community colleges became fixtures in every county of the United States, not a single respondent suggested that perhaps it was time to rethink upper-level schooling in light of the arrival of this new kid on the block. (It is conceivable that the selection process predetermines these attitudes. That is to say that, even when seeking a nontraditional superintendent, selection committees operate with a bias against candidates willing to consider greater consumer choice.)

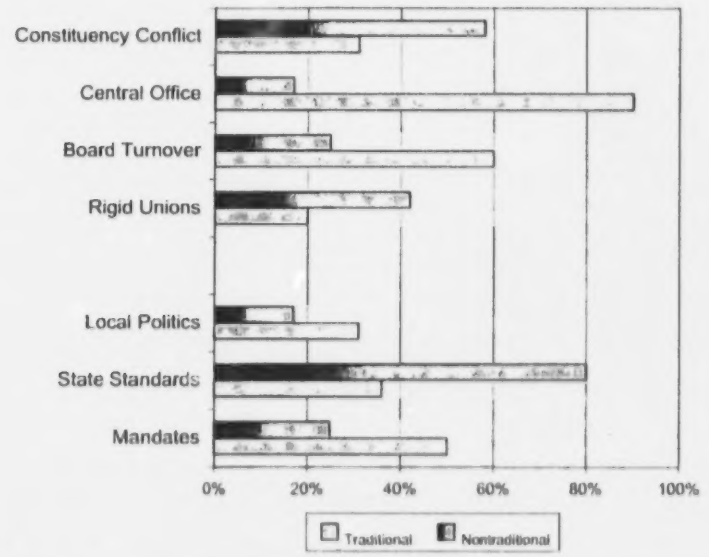
It turns out that the outsiders act traditionally as well. Most appear to be enthusiastic adherents of standards-based reform and accountability oriented around standards. They are committed to focusing on achievement. And they appear to be more enthusiastic about standards than many educators from traditional backgrounds. But in the end, they are traditional too. It is simply that the conventions they embrace are a technocrat's conviction that systems and "systemic" thinking can solve problems.

Challenging the System

Earlier, it was noted that superintendents, by and large, perceive external challenges to be more pressing than internal problems. That finding is a function of the 9:1 ratio of traditional to nontraditional superintendents in the survey. As Figure 5 demonstrates, it does not apply to superintendents from nontraditional backgrounds. These nontraditional superintendents typically are more inclined to identify problems inside the district as more pressing than those outside.

Figure 5 indicates that nontraditional superintendents bring with them into the superintendency the attitudes and perceptions of leaders outside the system. They appear to be more comfortable with external criticism, and more inclined to accept it and challenge the system internally. They take external pressure in stride, being much less likely than traditional superintendents to find mandates, standards and accountability, and local politics to be major problems. On the other hand, they focus more than traditional superintendents on the problems they experience with unions and bureaucracy as they try to implement a reform agenda.

Figure 5.
Traditional Superintendents Focus on External Pressures; Nontraditional Superintendents Worry About Internal Problems.



The following are typical of the comments from nontraditional superintendents during the interviews. The comments are interesting largely as illustrations of what stands out in Figure 5, the extent to which nontraditional superintendents locate problems inside the district instead of outside it.

> ***"The level of raw conflict and incivility, especially with the teachers' union, is shocking. I've never faced the threat of physical violence in other jobs...."***

> ***"The hard issue ... is that the school district is a mature bureaucracy that must be dismantled. Few people understand how thorough and wrenching the change must be."***

> ***"As the reason [the board] hired us in the first place got further and further into history, as that [crisis] went away, it just became difficult to keep them focused."***

One of the most interesting features of Figure 5 is that it demonstrates how these new outsiders seem to be uncomfortable with the vagaries of grassroots politics. It is likely that many of these nontraditional superintendents were selected by local opinion shapers in a "political" process of sorts. They may, therefore, be more comfortable dealing with business leaders, mayors, city councils, and even governors and state legislators than the typical superintendent. Hence, they seem more comfortable with city and state politics than traditional superintendents.

But nontraditional superintendents are nearly twice as likely as those from traditional backgrounds to identify constituency conflict as a problem. They seem to find more contentious the grassroots politics that traditional superintendents take in stride. Parents angered about plans to close schools early for professional development, or community groups at war with each other about plans to install powerful lights on local school playing fields, are likely to be more confrontational about their concerns than business leaders or politicians.

Clarity, Focus, and Systems

What the nontraditional superintendents feel they bring to the job is a capacity to focus on student learning. They take it for granted that student achievement is what schools are all about, and they seem to be much more impatient with distractions than traditional superintendents. One put this sense of impatience with distractions into a memorable statement:

> ***"There were a whole bunch of diversions. The busses literally didn't run at the beginning of one school year. Huge diversion. One winter it got so cold that the pipes froze. So then you had to relocate kids. Big problem. One year, two kids were killed. It was horrible. We went through this whole thing with kids being ineligible for the final game of the state basketball tournament. A huge diversion. The mega-frustration was there were always a million things that could knock you off course."***

It is clear from the interviews that the nontraditional superintendents viewed improving student achievement, normally within the context of standards-based reform, as their primary focus. As one superintendent said:

> ***"We were incredibly focused on student achievement and really kind of asked every other part of the organization to bow down and pay attention and try to make a contribution. And I'm not convinced that others who***

had grown up in the traditions of schools would have focused as tightly as we did and as relentlessly as we did."

Naïveté as an Asset

Several of these superintendents spoke of their lack of familiarity with education issues, jargon, and thinking as a positive advantage in dealing with the central office. In an interesting choice of words, they spoke of their "naïveté" as a strength in questioning accepted theory:

"One of my strengths, oddly enough, is that I'm naive about these issues. I'm not burdened by the traditional wisdom."

Another also spoke of this naïveté, indeed in some sense "ignorance," as a positive asset:

"Our major asset was an interesting combination of ignorance, naiveté, and, in a funny sort of way, clarity. The fact that we didn't know very much about this meant that we could ask a lot of questions that the organization itself would never ask."

On occasion this naïveté can help produce change. One nontraditional superintendent simply insisted to the board that no board in the private sector would waste a CEO's time with administrative trivia. He succeeded in streamlining board meetings and focusing the board on policy. Another superintendent from a nontraditional background adopted the concept of students and parents as "clients" or "customers," entitled to make their own decisions and select their own preferences. He helped replace a school assignment policy based on attendance zones with parental choice (backed up by district transportation) within broad geographic boundaries. Sometimes, in short, naïveté can be an asset. Lacking an insider's understanding of how things "should" be done, the newcomer can suggest new ways of thinking and shake up the existing order of things.

Jury Still Out

The new superintendents are a very interesting group of people. Trained outside education, they evince a confidence in their ability to make a difference that is impressive. Brought in from outside the field, they have to contend with ill-disguised suspicion from their more traditional colleagues. And asked to reshape the structure and culture of the institution they lead, some occasionally reveal a disdain for the enterprise they are expected to motivate. For the most part, prior to this survey, little effort had been made to study them systematically, so

this chapter represents a first research effort of sorts in this area. Yet if anything is clear from the study team's analysis, it is that nontraditional superintendents are struggling with exactly the same challenges their traditional peers find so unsettling. Will they experience any greater success? Only time will tell. On that question, the jury is still out.

Chapter 7 On-the-Job Training

Training can be improved, but experience counts for a lot. The superintendency is a public management position in which political skill and calculation are as important as expertise about instruction.

In light of the Center's interviews, the authors were convinced that, given the opportunity, sitting superintendents would complain bitterly during the survey about their preparation for the job. Certainly in the interviews, the clear sense was not so much that incumbents felt poorly prepared but that the entire training protocol for superintendents had let them down. Typical comments included:

> *"You can't expect to train people in graduate school and then have them remember it 20 or 30 years later when they take on the superintendency."*

> *"Nobody told us how to cope with the complexity of city politics. My Ph.D. program acted as if it did not exist.... We have to learn the toughest things on the job: dealing with unions, firing principals, being humane bosses while putting kids first. Our education school training implies these things just don't come up."*

What seemed apparent from the interviews was that training in the traditional elements of the superintendency (often thought of as busses, budgets, and books) missed the greatest challenges superintendents face. Potential superintendents are not exposed to the nuances and difficulties of the role. Traditionally, academic training has focused on learning theory, budget development, and discrete interests of university faculty far removed from the actual job-site.

Superintendent training, it seems, does little to prepare leaders for the highly ambiguous situations they are about to enter, in which political skill and calculation are as important as expertise about instruction. Most superintendents come from the ranks of principals and reflect the current limitations of that role. This background, while perhaps encouraging skill in instructional matters, does not necessarily

provide individuals with the experience or skills needed to develop a vision or run a large organization that is constantly under public scrutiny.

The job has changed and training has not been able to keep up. Increasingly, today's superintendency requires managing local politics, building leadership capacity within the organization, and staying out front of complex education dynamics while dealing with legislators and the media.

Yet behind the complaints lies a more nuanced issue. It seems that although the complaints are directed at preparation programs, what superintendents are really complaining about is their shock at the public and highly politicized nature of the job, once they are named superintendent. Preparation programs, apparently, either gloss over or ignore important public dimensions of the job. One superintendent summed this sense up powerfully:

> ***"I was 22 years in one system, coming up through the ranks to an associate superintendent. I thought I was ready.... The difference to being second in command and the superintendent is so vast and so unexplainable because of the political context of the job."***

The survey explicitly explored these issues. Generally, the study team was interested in understanding how well superintendents were prepared for the job. More specifically, the team explored whether academic training, prior experience, or a combination of the two had been helpful to superintendents. Finally, the survey asked about preparation in specific skill areas—busses, budgets, and books; standards-based reform; management and leadership skills; and working with oversight bodies and other "public faces" of school systems. Respondents were asked to "agree," "somewhat agree," "somewhat disagree," or "disagree" with statements about their preparation. Then they were explicitly asked if they were "well prepared," "somewhat prepared," "poorly prepared," or "not prepared" in each of the skill areas.

After combining the "agree" and "somewhat agree" responses it is clear that most people thought their training was quite good and that, combined with administrative experience, they were reasonably well prepared for the challenges of the office.

Table 3 outlines the responses from the survey.

Table 3.
Both Traditional and Nontraditional Superintendents Felt Well Prepared for Job

	Proportion "agreeing" or "somewhat agreeing"		
	All	Traditional	Nontraditional
Academic training prepared me for the superintendency	73%	71%	88%
Prior experience prepared me for job	94%	95%	88%
Combination of training/experience prepared me	93%	92%	100%

Quite clearly, nearly 30% of traditional respondents report that their academic training did them little good. Obviously this needs some attention. But, the surprise here is the supreme self-confidence of the nontraditional superintendents. Every one of them felt qualified by a combination of training and background to assume the superintendent's responsibilities. And, although most of them trained in professional schools outside schools of education, they report themselves happier with their academic training than their traditional colleagues. It is possible that their education and experience has equipped them to feel comfortable taking on complex challenges and problems, in ways that traditional educators are not. Their responses may be little more than an assertion of their own belief that, in effect, they can handle any complex problem thrown their way.

Additional insight into how well prepared superintendents were for their positions can be found in the more detailed examination of skill sets incorporated in the survey. Table 4 summarizes the responses.

Table 4.
Traditional and Nontraditional Superintendents Have Different Skills

Skills for Which Superintendents Felt Prepared	Proportion "well prepared"		
	All	Traditional	Nontraditional
Leading learning community—setting standards and assessing instructional methods	54%	59%	25%
Basics of district operations—busses, budgets and books	42%	44%	25%
Leadership skills—defining vision, setting goals, and devising strategy	61%	71%	67%
Negotiating change—managing conflict, creating coalitions, dealing with community relations	49%	46%	67%
Management skills in finance, personnel, and real estate	34%	30%	58%
Working with elected board, council, or other oversight body	23%	17%	58%

Table 4 displays the responses in a particular order. The order reflects the numerical difference between the proportion of traditional and nontraditional superintendents reporting themselves "well prepared." The difference declines and, at the bottom of the table, nontraditional superintendents have the advantage over the traditional. What this indicates is that traditional superintendents feel most confident dealing with leading a learning community and "busses, budgets, and books."

Conversely, nontraditional superintendents report themselves at something of a disadvantage in these areas. In terms of "leadership," the responses are so close to each other that the difference is scarcely worth mentioning. Both sets of respondents report themselves relatively comfortable defining a vision, setting goals, and devising strategies to attain them.

Meanwhile, nontraditional superintendents clearly feel themselves to be quite strong at working with elected boards, employing management and budget skills, and negotiating change. In some sense, it is hardly surprising that nontraditional superintendents would define their strengths to lie in management and negotiating change. That is what most of them had been involved with prior to their school experience.

At the same time, the strengths and weaknesses of the skill-sets defined by the two groups are a reflection of the "problem" areas they identified earlier. Traditional superintendents find outside pressures most difficult and their skill-sets put them at a relative disadvantage in dealing with such pressures. Conversely, nontraditional superintendents reported that internal obstacles caused them the greatest trouble, and their skills are not well suited to the traditional meat and potatoes of school administration, where the skills of the central office can be found.

Comments from the nontraditional superintendents confirmed this sense that they drew confidently on their non-school experience to manage and oversee the large school enterprises under their care.

> ***"Knowing about the financial structure of big enterprises led me to look for money and unused assets within the school system. I knew we could do many things without waiting for big new appropriations. I'm still finding ways we can do what is needed.... This certainly includes selling unused assets, entering partnerships with private groups, and outsourcing activities the school system does inefficiently."***

Another leader spoke of the value of his legal background as a way to look past apparent legal obstacles:

> ***"Being a lawyer [helped]. In a rule-bound system, most issues turn on what someone says the law allows. I have a good sense of what is logical in any area of law, even if I don't know it in detail. So when somebody told me the law or regulations prevented some action, I could tell them they could not be right.... I could tell them, 'Look again.' "***

A Profession Set Apart?

This analysis leads inevitably to the conclusion that if the large-city superintendency was ever a profession set apart by the special skills and training required of its incumbents, it no longer is. It

seems clear from the interviews and survey data that big-city superintendents require all the skills and talents that leaders elsewhere in government, business, and charitable organizations draw on. Of course, they need to know something specific about schooling. But they also need to be able to work comfortably with politics, finance, management, and setting directions in large complex organizations.

Nothing in the results reported here supports the idea that the people best able to learn the skills required of a superintendent are those who started out as teachers and worked their way up through the system. Indeed, although the team can offer no empirical evidence to support this assertion, some of the team members were struck by how difficult, and almost painful, it was for traditional educators to look critically at the system which had brought them to positions of leadership and community prominence.

Many of the grizzled veterans of the superintendency were among the first in their families to graduate from college. Public education took them in, offered them a home, and raised them to positions of power and influence in their communities. It is understandable that, given such a history, these superintendents are not inclined to criticize the institution that has done so much for them.

What begins to emerge is a sense that people who start out in the classroom and administration may well be put at a disadvantage when it comes time to manage the enterprise and learn these new skills. Leaders who start out in other fields need to learn about schooling. But they can learn what they need to know immediately before or shortly after they take on a superintendent's position. It is equally true that traditionally trained superintendents need to learn politics, finance, management, and vision. But what they have to learn about these issues is so much more complex than what nontraditional superintendents have to learn about schooling, that it is possible they start their new jobs at a disadvantage.

The implication is that the big-city superintendency should be considered a public management position, one that should encourage people to get their basic preparation in many ways. If the point is to find the best people to lead urban districts, experience counts for a lot. And a career in social services administration, law, business, city management, or academic administration—a career providing experience in complex organizations, surrounded by difficult political and governance issues—deserves consideration at least equal to experience in schools.

The truth is that compared to other professional milieus in which professional managers find themselves, the typical school system is a fairly narrow pedagogic culture. It might make sense for people to be considered eligible for the superintendency only after they had had diverse leadership experiences in some sector, either in schools or elsewhere.

Chapter 8

Taking Action: The View from the Superintendent's Chair

Superintendents need to be freed from constraints. They want the authority they need to become true educational CEOs.

People are quick to criticize superintendents for not accomplishing much and school districts for not making headway in closing the achievement gap. But few offer concrete proposals to remedy the problems that everyone can agree are real.

Based on literature in the field and hints from early interviews about changes superintendents might be inclined to support, the study team included in the survey four distinct governance reform possibilities for the superintendents to judge. The survey asked the respondents simply to agree or disagree on whether major elements of each of the four distinct models would be desirable.

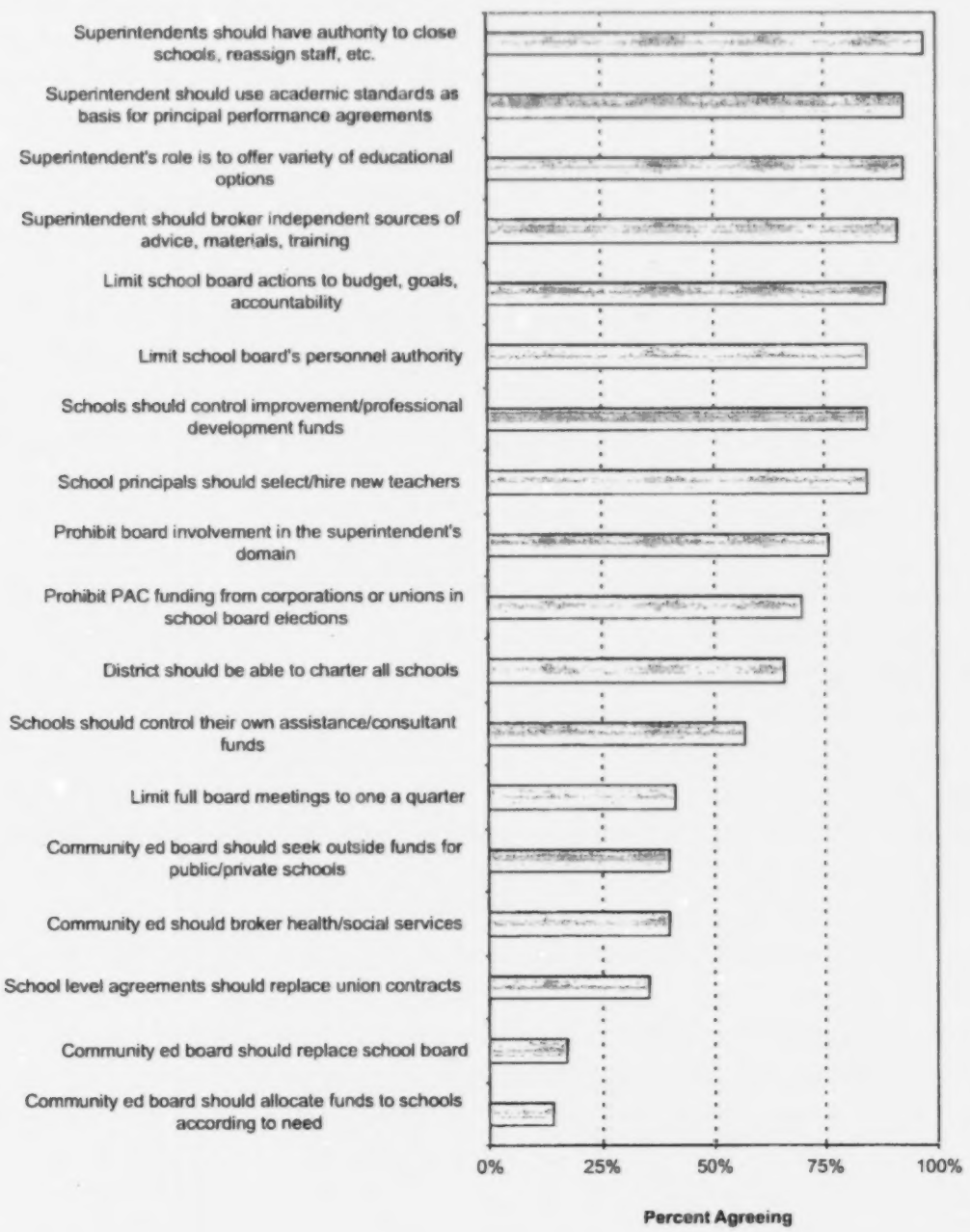
The four models called for:

- limiting the role of the school board
- strengthening the authority of both superintendents and schools
- rethinking school-district relationships
- creating a new governing board with oversight responsibilities for education, health, and social services.

The designers of the survey anticipated either that one of these four alternatives would stand head and shoulders above the rest or that all four of them would invite only passing interest. However, the superintendents enthusiastically endorsed just about every element of the first three alternatives and could scarcely conceal their disdain for the fourth. Figure 6 portrays all reform options presented to the superintendents, with their responses indicating which were thought to be most and least desirable.

In general, superintendents agree with these proposals at approximately the same levels no matter their race, the complexity of their districts, or their prior work experience. In light of oft-repeated concerns about boards and

Figure 6.
Superintendents Desire Authority to Match Their Responsibilities


Superintendents should have authority to close schools, reassign staff, etc.
Superintendent should use academic standards as basis for principal performance agreements
Superintendent's role is to offer variety of educational options
Superintendent should broker independent sources of advice, materials, training
Limit school board actions to budget, goals, accountability
Limit school board's personnel authority
Schools should control improvement/professional development funds
School principals should select/hire new teachers
Prohibit board involvement in the superintendent's domain
Prohibit PAC funding from corporations or unions in school board elections
District should be able to charter all schools
Schools should control their own assistance/consultant funds
Limit full board meetings to one a quarter
Community ed board should seek outside funds for public/private schools
Community ed should broker health/social services
School level agreements should replace union contracts
Community ed board should replace school board
Community ed board should allocate funds to schools according to need
0%
25%
50%
75%
100%
Percent Agreeing

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superintendents' lack of authority, it is no surprise that the vast majority of superintendents enthusiastically endorse restructuring options. These options would increase their ability to make change in their districts and decrease the possibility of the board (or others) interfering in the reform agenda.

Limiting School Board Role

With respect to school boards, Table 5 outlines the responses in each of the major elements outlined in the proposal:

Table 5.
Superintendents Are Eager to Clarify Board Roles, Hedge Board Personnel Authority, and Limit the Role of PAC and Union Funding in Board Elections

Proposal	Percent Who Agree
Limit school boards to budget development, setting educational goals, ensuring accountability for results, assessing the superintendent's performance, and succession planning .	89%
Limit school board authority to superintendency only (i.e., the board should not be involved in any other personnel decisions).	84%
Prohibit board members from involving themselves in matters of personnel, curriculum, and other areas in the superintendent's domain.	76%
Prohibit PAC funding from corporations and unions in school board elections.	70%
Limit full board meetings to one a quarter. (Committees could meet more frequently.)	41%

It is difficult to get 90% approval for any proposal. It amounts to near unanimity. Yet that is precisely what we find with respect to limiting the board. The overwhelming consensus of superintendents is that school governance would be healthier if boards were restricted to a broad policy role that limited them to developing the budget, setting goals, ensuring accountability, assessing the superintendent's performance, and planning for a successor to the superintendent. It is functions such as these that take up the time of corporate boards. Respondents seemed to feel that the public would be better served if school boards spent their time on these activities rather than on approving field trips, personnel slates, and school texts.

Similarly, in part to avoid issues of patronage, very broad support exists for limiting the board's personnel authority to hiring, evaluating, and firing the superintendent. Massachusetts, in fact, already has something similar on the books; school boards' personnel authority is limited to approving hiring of the superintendent and his or her top half-a-dozen deputies. The practice of bringing school principals and slates of teachers before the board for its approval is a thing of the past. The third point, prohibiting board members from micromanaging, is simply a restatement of the themes of the first two. It also enjoys support from more than three-quarters of the respondents.

Many superintendents are obviously deeply troubled by union funding of board candidates. During our interviews, one of the respondents described it as a scandal waiting to happen. "It should be prohibited," in the eyes of this superintendent, "since it creates a blatant conflict of interest." What he meant was that board members elected with union support are beholden to the very union with which they must then bargain on behalf of the public. Seven out of ten superintendents would like to rein in campaign financial assistance from both corporations and unions in school board elections.

Close to half the respondents also favored limiting board meetings to one per quarter. Again, this element was built on the corporate model of how boards operate. In light of interviewed superintendents' complaints about the frequency of board meetings and the inordinate amount of time spent preparing for and following up on them, the survey designers anticipated that this proposal would be very popular with superintendents. As it turned out, it was one of the half-a-dozen least desirable options presented to the superintendents. When push comes to shove, it may be that superintendents find fairly regular and frequent meetings with their board to be more valuable than they normally acknowledge.

All in all, it is clear that superintendents are eager to reshape governance, particularly in terms of board roles, a reflection of the frustration they express repeatedly about board meddling and micromanagement.

Strengthening Authority

Table 6 outlines superintendents' views with regard to strengthening the authority of the superintendent and the school principal.

For all intents and purposes, superintendents are unanimous in wanting authority to close failing schools, reassign staff and re-open the schools under new management.[12] This element carries superintendents' desire to reas-

[12] Public Agenda also found similar results among its survey of superintendents nationwide. Ninety-two percent thought that: "giving administrators far more autonomy to run the schools while holding them accountable for getting results" would be a very (45%) or somewhat (47%) effective way of improving school leadership. Public Agenda also found that superintendents nationwide want more authority to be able to remove bad teachers, with 73 percent saying that this would be a very effective way to improve educational leadership and 23 percent saying that it would be somewhat effective. *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Technical Appendix*, questions 94, 99.

sign teachers to where they are most needed to its logical extreme. When schools persistently fail students, superintendents want the authority to act.

Table 6.
Superintendents Want to Strengthen their own Authority and Enhance the Authority of School Principals

Proposal	Percent Who Agree
Superintendents should have the authority to close failing schools, reassign staff, and re-open them under new management.	97%
Superintendents should use academic standards as the basis for performance agreements with principals.	93%
Schools should be permitted to control their own improvement and professional development funds, contingent on fulfilling annual performance agreements with the superintendent.	84%
School staff, led by principals, should be able to select and hire new teachers.	84%

Superintendents are also very eager (93% agreement) to gain leverage to focus on student achievement by making academic standards the basis of performance agreements with principals. In one sense, the two final elements in Table 6—providing schools with the authority to control their own improvement funds and encouraging schools to select and hire their own teachers—are the other side of the accountability equation. If schools (and principals) are to be held accountable, they are entitled to the flexibility needed to make the changes they think essential.

After some 20 years of ferment over the issue, urban superintendents appear to be converts to the idea that their main task is not running schools in detail but in seeing to it that the schools under their control function properly and focus on achievement.

Rethinking School-District Relationships

Table 7 outlines superintendents' responses regarding rethinking school-district roles.

Table 7.
Superintendents Are Eager to Redefine School-District Relationships and Create More Charter-Like Arrangements

Proposal	Percent Who Agree
The superintendent's role should be to ensure that the district provides a variety of educational offerings. The board should oversee the superintendent's fulfillment of this responsibility.	93%
The superintendent should also be responsible for brokering independent sources of curricular advice, instructional materials, technical assistance, and teacher training.	91%
Districts should be authorized to charter every school or enter into contracts with schools governed by accountability for educational results.	66%
Schools should control their own funds which would pay for their own technical assistance and consultants.	57%
In a decentralized system in which schools do their own hiring, school-level agreements should replace district-wide union agreements.	36%

Although the designers of the survey thought of this third option (redefine school-district relations) as separate from the second (strengthen authority of both superintendents and principals), it seems that respondents considered them to be extensions of each other or different sides of the same coin. Just as the respondents responded extremely favorably to proposals to strengthen the authority of superintendents and principals, they also demonstrate overwhelming support for redefining school-district relationships.

More than 90% of respondents agree that the superintendent's role should be ensuring a variety of educational offerings in the district, with the board directed to hold the superintendent accountable for meeting this responsibility. (It is possible that some respondents interpreted this as offering curricular options within the context of comprehensive schools, rather than a portfolio of schools. But that interpretation is unlikely to hold up since all of these options are so clearly within the framework of governance changes, not curriculum.) The same proportion believe superintendents should act as brokers of services and contractors for district schools.

Authorizing districts to enter into chartering arrangements is less popular than the two options above, but it still commands the support of two-thirds of the respondents (66%). This high number looks limited only in comparison with the 90% approval ratings of the other elements. Support from two-thirds of the respondents is still strikingly high. This "charter" finding represents a significant turnaround in the thinking of urban superintendents over the last decade. When charter schools were first proposed, the reaction by school administrators was immediate and strong—and it was near-unanimous hostility. Today, two-thirds of the leaders of these school districts report that they support charter schools and charter-like arrangements such as contracts with all schools.

Mirroring the proposals in the "strengthen authority" alternative, an impressive majority of urban superintendents (57%) support providing schools with their own funds for hiring consultants and technical experts.

Superintendents are less enthusiastic about changes in union-district relations. In recent years, academics have proposed decentralizing union bargaining to the school site level and encouraging building-local agreements. Only about one-third of superintendents are attracted to this idea, possibly a reflection of their fear that collective bargaining is too complicated and sensitive to decentralize without creating many more problems than can now be foreseen.

The union issue aside, it seems clear that urban superintendents support a wide variety of new models of district-school governance that until recently they repudiated in quite harsh terms.

Creating a New Governing Board

Until recently, educators in low-income communities spent a lot of time explaining the poor performance of their students by pointing to the variety of social ills and community problems with which students (and schools) had to contend. Some have argued that urban school reform requires community-wide support and that a new kind of community board should be created to broker health and social services, raise funds for distressed schools, and distribute funds to schools on a per-pupil basis. The superintendents responding to this survey showed very little interest in the concept.

Several of the survey options presented to the superintendents did not receive majority backing among respondents. Table 8 presents data on the wisdom of establishing a new kind of governing board.

Table 8.
Superintendents Display Little Interest in a Board with Broader Powers to Broker Essential Community Services

Proposal	Percent Who Agree
A community education board should broker health and social services for meeting the needs of disadvantaged children.	40%
A community education board should seek private funds for struggling schools, both public and private.	40%
A community education board, including elected or mayorally-appointed civic and community leaders, should replace school boards.	17%
A community education board should oversee the allocation of funds to schools on a per-pupil basis, with schools controlling all funds.	14%

It is highly likely that faced with a fairly radical reconception of the role of school boards, respondents reflected on the school boards they see and questioned whether it was reasonable to expect these boards to exercise expanded authority wisely. Superintendents might also be expected to defend what is more familiar to them. School boards as they now exist are a known entity. When asked to consider a super-board charged with responsibility for overseeing the delivery of education, health and social services, superintendents may simply have fallen back on defending the "devil they know" as preferable to the one they do not.

It is interesting to note, however, that there was some indication that superintendents in the more-complex districts show greater willingness to consider working with a community education board, especially in the provision of health and other social services to students in need. More than half of superintendents in more-complex districts (53%) were attracted to the idea of a community board fulfilling those functions. Superintendents in more-complex districts were also more likely than those in less-complex ones to support a community education board seeking private funds for struggling schools (47% vs. 32%); replacing existing school boards with community education boards (28% vs. 6%); and having such a board oversee per-pupil allocations to schools (19% vs. 9%). This may be a case of the more challenging the district, the more superintendents seek additional sources of assistance.

"We Lack Authority"

Looking beyond the specifics of these proposals, what these superintendents are complaining about at root is that they do not have the authority they need to do their jobs. They are crying out to be freed up from the minutia and detail of the constraints that hem them in, whether that be board meddling or union rigidity. They seek the authority they need to become genuine educational CEOs, people who are given a clear sense of what is expected of them and then held accountable for results. That is the common element that ties together their interest in clarifying board roles, reducing board interference in personnel matters, strengthening their own authority and that of principals, and even in redefining district-school relationships around charter-like contracting.

Models of such approaches exist. The strength of American higher education is often attributed to a governance structure in which strong boards buffer presidents from political interference while scrupulously avoiding meddling in campus affairs. Independent charter schools, often with their own boards, provide a similar model, offering individual schools much more independence.

Parochial school systems represent another model. These systems often rival public schools in scale and scope, yet they generally exhibit a tight-loose organizational structure. In the two dioceses the study team consulted, for example, small central diocesan offices restrict themselves to outlining general parameters for curriculum and instruction. (Small means small. One of these dioceses oversees 65 schools educating 22,000 students with a staff of just five people.) The educational strength of the system is considered to be the fact that the schools are site-managed and make their own decisions. So individual schools set and collect their own tuition, manage and finance their own physical plant, and establish their own policies with the assistance of local parents.

It is not written anywhere that schools have to be organized and operated like large, impersonal, public bureaucracies. The challenge for leadership is to find ways to maintain the integrity of public education while opening up these schools to new ways of achieving their mission.

Chapter 9 Implications

Barriers to school reform are too numerous to overcome just with new and better leadership. Preparation must be improved and district governance should be reshaped.

This investigation began with a question. Is the job of the urban school superintendent as currently structured essentially programmed for failure? Is the job, in fact, "impossible"?

In many ways, the superintendents interviewed and canvassed during this research believe that it is. In some communities, the surprising thing is not that superintendents last for only a few years, but that they survive the first twelve months. School leaders, faced with educational change moving at whitewater speed, are often set adrift without a rudder. Goals for the district are not sharply defined or broadly accepted. Important considerations such as student learning get lip service in public, but scant attention behind closed doors. Everyone genuflects before the altar of student achievement, but most prayers are offered up around the politics and economics of schools. Even where superintendents understand what needs to be done as first steps in closing the achievement gap, they find union politics and community disputes about who controls which resources to be near-insurmountable obstacles. It is little wonder that superintendents so frequently fail.

There are, however, some genuine signs of new possibilities in the research reported here. In a perverse way, it is encouraging that the "happy talk" among superintendents is coming to an end and they are beginning to speak out about the untenable position in which they have been placed. Expectations for the typical urban superintendent are out of line with reality. It's impossible for one person to be on top of everything in a complex system, particularly one in which authority is so widely dispersed. People reading the paper in the morning may consider the superintendent to be in charge of the schools; too many superintendents consider themselves to be little more than staff to the board. And, in truth, that's frequently the case. The fact that superintendents are speaking up is a positive sign.

The growing interest in superintendents from nontraditional backgrounds is also cause for celebration. Although, as noted in Chapter 6, the jury is still out on these new kinds of educators, it is equally apparent that these newcomers are more willing to challenge the system they lead than their more traditional

brethren. In addition, because urban systems are large, complex, corporate and civic enterprises, they deserve to be led by people who comprehend the complexities of leading such an entity. Managing a big-city school system is not simply the application of a school principal's skills in a trickier and more complicated environment. Overseeing a big-city school system calls for leadership skills akin to those required of a corporate CEO or senior government official. These leaders must be able to clarify goals, define objectives, and, if need be, organize and re-orient the entire enterprise around new aims.

People from outside education and government are at least as likely to possess these skills as people from within schools. Clearly it should not be a threat to the education profession to contemplate a situation in which large-district superintendents' positions were open to the best possible candidates, not simply those trained in a particular field.

Finally, the clear preference of sitting superintendents for major changes in governance should be recognized and applauded. Large urban districts face a lot of challenges. Many of these challenges grow out of dynamics internal to the districts. From the point of view of superintendents, several changes would help them focus more on the educational needs of the students in their care.

The list of changes endorsed by overwhelming majorities of the respondents is daunting. They would limit board discretion, create more charter schools, enter into contracts to establish more schools, close buildings and reassign staff, deregulate budgets and provide greater authority (along with accountability) at the building level. It is doubtful that such far-reaching and politically painful reforms would have commanded a majority among school superintendents a decade ago. Yet today, among urban superintendents, two-thirds or more agree with all of these proposals.

Leadership Essential, but Not Enough

Those proposals appear to be critical correlates to leadership success. Finding or preparing better leaders is an insufficient strategy for reforming American schools. School system structure, as much as leadership, requires attention. Leadership in itself is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for school reform. Barriers to reform are too numerous to overcome just with new and better people. School district governance needs to be reshaped as well.

Several implications appear to flow from these conclusions:

First, is the sense that district reform cannot be carried out in a vacuum that ignores the state. Governance needs to be reshaped and doing so will require many different groups to take action. Governors, legislators, local elected officials, policy groups, and foundations interested in school reform all

have a role to play. Much of what needs to be done cannot be accomplished with major revisions to state codes, many of which, in one way or another, specify the very behavior from boards that superintendents find so onerous.

Second, pre- and in-service training of superintendents urgently needs attention. Training for both traditional and nontraditional superintendents should be re-conceptualized to pay attention to the public dimensions of the job. Partnerships with schools of business administration, government, and law should become much more common. At the same time, opportunities for traditional educators to find mentors and spend internships outside schools should be matched by similar mentoring and internship opportunities for non-educators within schools. In addition, in-service programs for superintendents might find useful models in the brief executive training programs provided for business and corporate leaders.

Next, better people require more than simply better training. Training can always help individuals overcome some weaknesses, but it is unlikely to make a military general into an instructional specialist or a former teacher into a seasoned political professional. What is needed is individualized training. Instead of trying to create a uniform corps of superintendents, new training programs need to be developed to help potential leaders gain what they lack by providing on-demand, customized assistance.

Fourth, the axiom of "horses for courses" applies in urban school leadership. Sometimes a district needs an instructional leader; sometimes it requires a good manager; and sometimes it will be in desperate need of political leadership. It need hardly be said that at different times, different types of leadership skills will be called for, even in the same district.

Fifth, it must be acknowledged that although better people in the superintendency can help solve part of the leadership challenge, they can solve only a part of the educational problem. If better people are not the whole answer, then the job has to change.

This implies that superintendents need enough authority to lead and change their districts. Given the expectations imposed on them, they are entitled to authority commensurate with their responsibilities. Chapter 1 of this report noted that even students in Management 101 understand that organizational goals need to be clear and that leaders need authority and support from their governing bodies, along with incentives and time to achieve organizational goals. Yet urban superintendents can count on none of these factors.

If urban superintendents are to be expected to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap, a constellation of changes is required to empower superintendents:

- more authority over central office staff, hiring, and performance assessment
- a greater say in defining district mission
- explicit power to hire, assign, and fire school principals
- authority to put the best teachers where they can do the most good
- more authority over district funds, both to ensure that schools impacted by poverty get a fair share of money and to invest in people, programs, methods, and new school designs
- authority over district funds should be combined with greater autonomy in mixing and matching Federal, state, and categorical funding streams.

Earlier in this chapter, it was noted that too frequently superintendents are treated as board staff. The changes sketched above can help transform superintendents into district CEOs, leaders equipped to work with school boards to achieve district goals. Of all the district's goals, improving student performance and closing the achievement gap are the most important. In pursuit of those goals, superintendents must have at their disposal the elementary administrative tools required to effect achievement—namely authority over staff, building leadership, teachers, and budgets.

Sixth, another part of the change required in the superintendent's position is the development of more stable political support within the community. We have argued that a large-district superintendency is more akin to a major public leadership position than it is to a simple school management role. The very visibility of the position, combined with its political and economic clout within districts, puts the position of school superintendent into the political arena. All successful big-city superintendents are politicians, whether they want to be or not—and whether they function well or poorly in the role.

It is, therefore, essential to shore up and stabilize political support for these highly visible leaders. They need links to community leadership, developed through either their own skill or being "adopted" by senior local leaders. Ideally, new superintendents might be recruited from local leadership ranks.

Next, superintendents need more stable boards—and schools and communities deserve them. A sort of romance about school boards exists in the United States implying that their election is the embodiment of democratic ideals in American schools. But apart from that attractive myth, there is no *a priori* reason to think that elected boards are essential to this public service.

Boards definitely help bring the community and its parents into schools. But it is unclear whether elections, typically held in off-years and involving only a tiny fraction of the electorate, are the best way to guarantee public input. It may be time to consider board appointment as the best way to insure public oversight of large districts, with senior local elected officials doing the appointing and being held accountable for board performance. An appointment strategy that provides for a portion of the board members rotating off every three years might provide the stability and institutional memory required for effective board functioning.

Beyond stability, board discipline is also essential. Police and fire department chiefs are not asked to justify patrol car schedules or when they wash their engines to a board. Yet superintendents responding to our survey complained vocally about the amount of micromanagement they must endure. Apart from the minutia of micromanagement, the sheer number of meetings (of boards and board committees) consumes enormous amounts of time from superintendents and their staffs. If superintendents are to operate more like CEOs, boards must come to see their role as one of providing policy guidance, overseeing budget development, and evaluating the CEO's performance and planning for his or her succession. Effective corporate and academic boards restrict themselves to functions such as those—and school boards should as well.

Finally, in terms of political support, communities need to be able to sustain a reform strategy even if a superintendent resigns, passes away, or proves to be inadequate to the task. The reform strategy cannot be the creature of the superintendent or else it collapses when the superintendent moves on.

Here, a community support mechanism that can maintain momentum for reform (and, if necessary, insist on some discipline from the superintendent and the board) may be essential. Such a group could be created by local community and business leaders. Or, it might be a citizens' group originally formed to help provide financial support for local schools. But its essential attribute should be independence from the central office and board so that it can, if necessary, become the keeper of the flame when support or interest in reform falters or wanes within the schools themselves.

In the end, the issue is not simply finding better leaders. The real issue is how to build and sustain strategies for eliminating the achievement gap. Good superintendents will be those who are committed to doing that, regardless of background or training. What the superintendents in this study are saying is that commitment, while necessary, is not sufficient. Current conditions and structures impede them in that effort and must be changed.

Appendices

A. Acknowledgments

B. Methods

C. Survey

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Finally, we must acknowledge the contributions of the superintendents who either took the time to meet with us or responded to the survey. Of necessity, these respondents must remain anonymous. But they were generous with their time, perceptive with their comments, and impressive in their support for the ideal of an education system in which all children learn. We could not have completed our work without them.

Methods

The research described in this report was based on two principle sources: a series of in-depth, person-to-person interviews, conducted individually and in focus groups; and a survey of superintendents from 100 of the largest districts in the United States.

Interviews

The study team conducted two focus groups with superintendents from traditional backgrounds leading districts with conventional forms of governance. Additionally, they interviewed another set of superintendents one-on-one. Respondents included former and current public school superintendents, current superintendents with nontraditional backgrounds, parochial school administrators, and heads of organizations operating multiple schools under contract.

Based on those interviews, the team next (1) crafted an interview protocol around the achievement gap; (2) conducted a focus group on the achievement gap with 12 superintendents; (3) used the protocol to interview another 4 former urban superintendents; and (4) sent a brief survey probing superintendents of the nation's 100 largest urban and suburban districts on a variety of issues. (The survey questions and results are presented in Appendix C.) All told, 40 superintendents were interviewed.

The Survey

The survey was sent in March 2002 to 100 superintendents from large urban and ex-urban districts. With respect to the survey, 70 superintendents responded to the initial mailing, a very healthy response rate. Because the survey encompassed the universe of large districts, the responses can be considered a fairly reliable indicator of the perceptions of big-city superintendents, but not, perhaps, of leaders of smaller and suburban school districts.

Although the 100 largest districts have many things in common (primarily size), they represent a range of types and locations of districts. The number of schools in these districts ranges from 44 to over 1,200. The population of the cities served ranges from 160,000 to more than seven million. The percentage of district children who are minorities ranges from 7% to 97%. And the percentage of children in poverty ranges from 3% to 45%. In other words, the districts differ along many dimensions. All are in large or mid-size cities or the fringes of such cities according to the 2000 U.S. Census; however, some serve primarily the central core of large cities while others serve areas that could almost seem to be small towns in comparison.

In order to clarify relationships among the various district variables, factor analysis was done using district size, percentages of children in poverty, percentages of children who are members of minority groups, and measures of city location. A single factor emerged, the scores of which were termed "complexity scores." Districts were then classified into two groups according to the scores: less-complex and more-complex. The characteristics of these two categories are shown in Table A.

Table A.
Characteristics of More-Complex and Less-Complex Districts

	Less-complex	More-complex	Total of All Districts in Survey
% in large city	22%	76%	49%
Average district population	459,524	844,828	652,176
Average # of students	79,728	129,833	104,781
Average # of schools	104	177	140
Average % minority students	35%	79%	57%
Average % children in poverty	13%	29%	21%
% minority superintendents	20%	44%	32%
% male superintendents	92%	74%	83%
% nontraditional superintendents	9%	14%	11%

A large majority of responding superintendents (89%) followed the traditional route to the superintendency: teacher, principal, central office staff, and superintendent. In order to assure that an adequate number of nontraditional superintendents were included in the study, an additional four from nontraditional backgrounds were surveyed. There were no statistically significant differences between the nontraditional superintendents in the first and second round of the survey. The responses of

the four additional nontraditional superintendents are *only* included in Chapter 6 where nontraditional superintendents are discussed. Because of this over-sampling of nontraditional superintendents, the survey can be relied on to reflect accurately the perceptions of these new administrators, from whom very little information has been previously collected.[13]

The 70 respondents of the first round of the survey largely reflected the demographics of individuals leading large school systems: 76% white; 14% African-American; 9% Hispanic; and 1.4% were Asian. About 80% of respondents were male and 20% were female. The plurality of respondents led complex, urban, high-poverty districts (40%), and a significant proportion led ex-urban, lower poverty districts (37%).[14]

[13] The over-sampling of nontraditional superintendents meant that some responses were returned from relatively small districts. Close analysis of the survey results reveals little or no difference between the responses of all superintendents and nontraditional superintendents leading smaller districts.

[14] Nontraditional superintendents are somewhat more likely than traditional superintendents to be white and employed in a more-complex district. None of the nontraditional superintendents included in this study are female. However, these differences in terms of race, gender, district size and district complexity are not statistically significant. In other words, nontraditional superintendents look very much like traditional superintendents in most ways.

DeWitt Wallace - Reader's Digest Funds & University of Washington
Superintendent Survey

Please return by: **Friday, April 12, 2002**. Use the enclosed envelope or fax to: 206-221-7402.

The Challenges of the Job

When we asked superintendents about the challenges of their jobs, their responses included the items listed below. We would like to know whether or not these are problems in your district as well. For each statement below, please indicate the extent to which you think it is or is not a problem in your district.

		NOT A PROBLEM	SLIGHT PROBLEM	MODERATE PROBLEM	MAJOR PROBLEM
1	Districts would like to respond to the public□s wishes, but public demands often change.	1	2	3	4
2	Even when the public's wishes are stable, demands from different constituencies often conflict with each other.	1	2	3	4
3	Local politics frequently intrude into district policymaking.	1	2	3	4
4	Boards micromanage the district and superintendent.	1	2	3	4
5	Boards are unfocused.	1	2	3	4
6	Board turnover is frequent and makes it hard to maintain support for district initiatives.	1	2	3	4
7	Union contracts are rigid and prevent the implementation of some reforms.	1	2	3	4
8	Central offices are overly bureaucratic and resist change.	1	2	3	4
9	Federal and state mandates hamstring districts.	1	2	3	4
10	State standards, accountability, and assessment create overwhelming pressure.	1	2	3	4

Achievement Gap

When we asked superintendents about student achievement in their districts, they were concerned about the achievenment gap. Please answer the following questions regarding your district.

		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	MODERATELY DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
11	The racial/ethnic achievement gap between students is a critical and chronic challenge.	1	2	3	4
12	I am confident that the programs we have in place will close the racial/ethnic achievement gap within 5 years.	1	2	3	4

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Preparation for the Job

We asked superintendents about how well prepared they were to do different parts of their jobs. For the items listed below we would like to know how well you were prepared, by either training or experience, or both.

		NOT PREPARED	POORLY PREPARED	SOMEWHAT PREPARED	WELL PREPARED
13	The basics of district operations - often referred to as buses, budgets, and books.	1	2	3	4
14	Leading a learning community - such as setting standards, matching curriculum and assessment to standards, and assessing instructional methods.	1	2	3	4
15	Broader management skills - such as finance, personnel, and real estate.	1	2	3	4
16	Leadership skills - such as defining a vision, setting goals, and devising strategy.	1	2	3	4
17	Negotiating change - such as managing conflict, creating coalitions and dealing with community relations.	1	2	3	4
18	Working with an elected board, council or other oversight body with its own "public face."	1	2	3	4

Gaining Momentum for Change

We also asked superintendents about what helped them bring about change in their district. Among other things, they mentioned the items below. For each, please tell us whether you have found it useful, or would find it useful, in your district to prod for change.

		NOT USEFUL	RARELY USEFUL	SOMEWHAT USEFUL	EXTREMELY USEFUL
19	Outside pressure in the form of mandates, standards, and state or federal legislation.	1	2	3	4
20	A perceived crisis in the district.	1	2	3	4
21	Demands from community groups.	1	2	3	4
22	Pressure for charter schools or other forms of parental choice.	1	2	3	4
23	Performance contracts between the board and the superintendent.	1	2	3	4
24	Audits and reports from independent organizations.	1	2	3	4
25	Media focus on school issues and school or district failings.	1	2	3	4
26	Coordinated support from community, businesses, and/or other outside organizations.	1	2	3	4

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Governance Reform Proposals

Below are various proposals for restructuring district governance in hopes of improving students performance. The proposals are grouped in 4 broad categories:

1) those that redefine the school board's role;

2) those that strengthen the authority of superintendents or schools;

3) those that rethink school-district relationships; and

4) those that envision a new kind of governing oversight body to monitor public education in a city.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with elements of each proposal.

	CLARIFY THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS	AGREE	DISAGREE
27	Limit school board actions to: budget development, setting educational goals, ensuring accountability for results, assessing the superintendent□s performance, and succession planning.	☐	☐
28	Limit school board authority to the superintendency only (e.g., the board should not be involved in any other personnel decisions).	☐	☐
29	Limit full board meetings to one a quarter. (Committees could meet more frequently.)	☐	☐
30	Prohibit board members from involving themselves in matters of personnel, curriculum and other areas in the superintendent domain.	☐	☐
31	Prohibit PAC funding from corporations or unions in school board elections.	☐	☐

	STRENGTHENING SUPERINTENDENT & SCHOOL AUTHORITY	AGREE	DISAGREE
32	Superintendents should use academic standards as the basis for performance agreements with principals.	☐	☐
33	Superintendents should have the authority to close failing schools, reassign staff, and re-open them under new management.	☐	☐
34	Schools should be permitted to control their own improvement and professional development funds, contingent on fulfilling annual performance agreements with the superintendent.	☐	☐
35	School staff, led by principals, should be able to select and hire new teachers.	☐	☐

	RETHINKING SCHOOL-DISTRICT RELATIONSHIPS	AGREE	DISAGREE
36	Districts should be authorized to charter every school or enter into contracts with schools governed by accountability for educational results.	☐	☐
37	The superintendent□s role should be to ensure that the district provides a variety of educational offerings. The board should oversee the superintendent's fulfillment of this responsibility.	☐	☐
38	The superintendent should also be responsible for brokering independent sources of curricular advice, instructional materials, technical assistance, and teacher training.	☐	☐
39	Schools should control their own funds which would pay for their own technical assistance and consultants.	☐	☐
40	In a decentralized system in which schools do their own hiring, school-level agreements should replace district-wide union agreements.	☐	☐

	CREATING A NEW GOVERNING BOARD	AGREE	DISAGREE
41	A community education board, including elected or mayorally-appointed civic and community leaders, should replace school boards.	☐	☐
42	A community education board should broker health and social services for meeting the needs of disadvantaged children.	☐	☐
43	A community education board should oversee the allocation of funds to schools on a per-pupil basis, with schools controlling all funds.	☐	☐
44	A community education board should seek private funds for struggling schools, both public and private.	☐	☐

Personnel Challenges

Many superintendents express concern regarding shortages of qualified central office administrators, building leaders, and teachers. Please circle the number which best describes your assessment of these personnel challenges.

		NOT A PROBLEM	SLIGHT PROBLEM	MODERATE PROBLEM	MAJOR PROBLEM
45	We face challenges in finding qualified *deputies and central office staff.*	1	2	3	4
46	We face challenges in getting qualified *school principals.*	1	2	3	4
47	We face challenges in getting qualified *teachers.*	1	2	3	4

48 What, in your mind, are the most important *attributes* of a successful principal.
Please rank the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being the most important):

Ability to execute a school improvement strategy. _____

Ability to motivate staff and hold them accountable for results. _____

Ability to minimize conflict at the school level (among teachers and parents). _____

Responsiveness to central office demands. _____

Ability to use money effectively to further improvement goals. _____

49 What, in your mind, are the most important *experiences* required to be a principal.
Please rank the following from 1 to 5 (with 1 being the most important):

Conflict resolution: managing competing interests. _____

Leadership: experience le[illegible]g professional colleagues. _____

Resource utilization: using resources effectively and efficiently. _____

Teaching experience. _____

Curriculum experience. _____

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Background and Preparation

Following are questions regarding your background and preparation.

50 I have been a school superintendent, in this district or elsewhere, for _____ years (please fill in number).

51 My background is (please check one of the following):

☐ **CONVENTIONAL** (for the most part: you started as a teacher, became an administrator, and as some point, pursued a doctorate and joined the central office). **PLEASE ANSWER QUESTIONS 52-56.**

☐ **UNCONVENTIONAL** (for the most part: you became a school superintendent following a career spent outside education, perhaps in business, law, the military, or other professions). **PLEASE ANSWER QUESTIONS 57-64.**

CONVENTIONAL

52 Years as a teacher: _____. Years as an administrator: _____.

	AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	DISAGREE
53 My academic training adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
54 Prior administrative experience in schools and the central office adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
55 The combination of academic training and prior administrative experience adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
56 I am certified in my state to be a school superintendent anywhere in my state.		YES	NO	N/A

UNCONVENTIONAL

57 Years as a professional (e.g.: law, government, media): ____. Years in an executive leadership role (e.g.: CEO, COO): ____.

	AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	DISAGREE
58 My *training* outside the field of education adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
59 My *prior experience* outside the field of education adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
60 The combination of training and experience outside education adequately prepared me for the challenges of the superintendency.	1	2	3	4
61 I am certified to be a school superintendent in my district.		YES	NO	N/A
62 I am certified to be a school superintendent anywhere in the state.		YES	NO	N/A
63 My *training* was in the field of (please specify, e.g., law, the private sector, military, government, etc.)				
64 My *experience* was in field of (please specify, e.g., law, the private sector, military, government, etc.)				

Thank you for your time. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Please do not hesitate to attach additional pages if you want to bring other issues to our attention.

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